

OPINION

AN ECHO PRESS EDITORIAL

Series' message: David is able to beat Goliath

If you think you're shopping habits don't really matter, that buying items online instead of locally doesn't have an impact, think again.

Local stores depend heavily on support from local residents, and every time you decide to order something online from Amazon or shop out of town, it hurts their bottom line. It hurts their ability to pay their workers, keep or add jobs and contribute to the overall economic vitality of the place we call home.

But it's not all gloom and doom either. There are success stories — local retailers who are adjusting to the times and small-town communities that are not just surviving but thriving.

That's the bottom-line lessons that can be gleaned from our three-part series, "Bricks and Clicks," that wrapped up in today's issue.

The series should shatter some myths people have about small towns, online shopping and what the future holds for local retail markets.

First off, small-town retail may be changing, but it's very much alive.

West Central Initiative, an organization that works to strengthen the economy in nine west-central Minnesota counties, has been delivering that message at webinars exploring the future of retail. Among its data: Online sales are less than 10 percent of total retail sales; small retail is growing twice as fast as big retail; and our region's small retailers are actually in a better position to thrive than before e-commerce.

With millions in retail sales at stake, local retailers have to be more nimble at adjusting to change than ever before. Local residents have to realize just how important it is to keep local dollars in the community, where they can turn over and over again. They should be supporting their local businesses like never before.

Change is difficult, but doing business the same as it has been done for eons isn't the answer. In our series, Tara Bitzan, executive director of the Alexandria Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce, noted that she's had conversations with owners of stores that have seen growth and those that have lost customers. "The differences in the businesses are often the ones who have adapted to the new

environment or have reinvented themselves," she said. "You have to be willing to grow and evolve to stay relevant."

To be successful, businesses should be listening to their customers and be willing to try new things, such as adjusting their hours so they're open when it's convenient for people to shop and not relying so heavily on peak summer months.

Retailers should also be focusing on the biggest edge they have over online shopping: providing a level of personalized service shoppers can't get through a computer.

Deb Brown of SaveYourTown, a group that helps West Central Initiative deliver webinars, says more consumers are seeking customer service. "People want to be treated special. They want to have an experience. They want to know they are valued," Brown said. "They don't want the same old thing."

Retailers shouldn't have to face future challenges on their own. Local governments have a big stake in it and must lend a hand through community events, beautifying downtowns and finding ways to create a better business climate. Fortunately, this has been happening. Detroit Lakes and Alexandria have redone its downtown streets and sidewalks to make them more pedestrian-friendly, while Wadena and Park Rapids have pursued partnerships with outside groups.

Businesses should work together — locally and regionally — on marketing and promotional campaigns that not only draw more people into their communities but also show the benefits of buying locally.

In our series, Jed Brazier, executive director of the Wadena Chamber of Commerce, provided good advice for local retailers who are the "Davids" competing against the "Goliaths" of the internet. It comes down to providing friendly, personalized service.

"You will never outbuy Amazon," Brazier said, "but you can pivot and lean into those things that you can do that they cannot, which is those conversations, that customer service, that goes so far into bringing people back into the door."

Bricks and Clicks, a Forum Lakes Group Series, was printed in our Nov. 23, Nov. 30 and Dec. 7 issues and is available online: Part 1, Part 2 and Part 3.

LETTERS

Time to reignite a sense of nationalism

To the editor:
It was John F. Kennedy back on Jan. 20, 1961, when he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." With this quote, JFK was advocating the promotion of our culture, and creating a sense of nationalism. In today's world, this man would sound more like a conservative Republican.

In the early 1960s, I learned in Mr. Radar's history class at Jefferson Senior High School that it's common for political parties to slowly evolve from liberalism to socialism, and eventually communism. At that time, we all feared the horrors of communism. Kids were taught to hide under their desks in case of nuclear attack.

In 1973, I took a social studies course at Mankato State University taught by a new Ph.D. instructor. His curriculum discussed his Ph.D. hypothesis: The decline of the American society will begin when thousands of impoverished people from poor countries flood over our borders in masses and dilute our society. At that time, I did not believe this could happen in America.

Now, all of this is coming into

fruition right before our eyes. It seems that JFK's party has lost their way and I fear they love their party more than this country. They say a few extra dollars in a tax cut are mere crumbs, yet they live in gated communities and have lifelong pensions. How can they ever relate to the average American struggling to make ends meet while raising a family?

We are at a critical stage in our country. We have elected a president who has the courage to stand up for America. We need to rethink those wise words of John F. Kennedy and reignite a sense of nationalism and pride for our way of life and protect the future of upcoming generations.

Alan Yeutter
Fergus Falls, MN

We're at a crossroads of truth vs. lies

To the editor:
Very interesting times. It appears that we are at a crossroads of our future. It is no longer about Democrats and Republicans; it is only about good vs evil, truth vs lies. We all need to find the fence separating the two and make sure we are on the correct side of it.

Dwight Behn
Alexandria, MN

IT'S OUR TURN

Is the past becoming irrelevant?

Imagine you're in a coffee shop having a discussion with someone about some problem you're both trying to solve. You've been at it all morning and have made some progress in that you have clarified the problem,

agree on some things and have agreed to disagree on others. It's at the same time both exhausting and invigorating.

Now imagine a third person (who was supposed to have been

there earlier) suddenly joins the discussion. The problem is, he or she has no knowledge of or interest in what has already been discussed. This person only wants to give their opinion of what the "facts" are.

For the first two people, it would probably feel very frustrating to suddenly have their progress interrupted and ignored, especially when it was by someone who didn't bother to show up earlier.

Unfortunately, this same situation is being played out every day as people who otherwise consider themselves educated ignore the past and jump straight into conclusions and opinions.

Until fairly recently in our history, most people have agreed that one of

the marks of an educated person was their knowledge of the great books written in the past. These books — which include fiction, poetry, politics, science and philosophy by authors such as Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Dante, Shakespeare and more — are rarely read anymore. They are considered old-fashioned, out of date and not inclusive enough.

These books are a part of what has been called the Great Conversation, the ongoing discussion of ideas that has been continuing since recorded history. At one time, people wanted to be knowledgeable about the conversation so they could participate and carry on the process of finding answers and discovering knowledge. But not anymore.

In fact, most people now seem to think the past itself is irrelevant and that the only ideas worth having are modern ones. They're not interested in continuing the conversation, but only in expressing their own opinions and "new ideas."

The problem is, our so-called "new ideas" are often simply old ideas that have already been discussed and tried. But, because we have no knowledge of the past, we not only believe they are new and original, but we miss out on all the thinking that has already gone into evaluating and possibly even testing them.

In addition to thinking the past is irrelevant, we also now tend to dismiss the

great books because they focus on Western civilization and aren't multicultural enough for us.

Yet, all of our current obsession with exploring other cultures doesn't change the fact that we are a part of Western civilization. It is both what built us and all that we are now. Ignoring that fact will not only keep us from understanding ourselves, but also make us incapable of understanding other cultures as well.

Similarly, our modern tendency to focus more on obscure authors who better represent minority groups is also misguided. If we want to join the discussion, we have to know what has already been discussed, otherwise we are just being a bully who intrudes and takes over the conversation. There will always be room for new ideas and authors, but we also need to understand the great books that have been most important in shaping Western civilization and thought.

That doesn't mean you have to agree with these authors, only that we need to acknowledge that they are the most influential and foundational to who we are — rightly or wrongly. To ignore these books is to ignore history; and to ignore history is to remain forever uneducated.

"It's Our Turn" is a weekly column that rotates among members of the Echo Press editorial staff.

THUMBS UP/ THUMBS DOWN

VIEWS BY THE ECHO PRESS EDITORIAL BOARD

Fort celebration ups and downs

Thumbs Up/Down: The Runestone Museum's annual Christmas in the Fort celebration is one of those distinctively local events that brings the whole community together for a festive start to the holiday season. There was record-breaking attendance this year — more than 1,500 turned out. The event was filled with high points — Santa and Mrs. Claus' arrival on one of the oldest cars in Alexandria — a 1913 Model T provided by local residents Bob and Lecia Baas. Hot coffee, cider and cookies were made possible by North Nokomis Caribou Coffee, Bell Bank, Alexandria Area High School, Roers Family Bakery and Robyn of Winning Edge Graphics. Entertainment was provided by the Zion School Choir, Carolers of Alexandria and Erickson's Petting Zoo of Osakis. But the event had some glitches that were pointed out by a couple of readers: There was no countdown, build-up or even a sound system for the climatic event of turning on the downtown lights. The lights just kind of came on and people went on their way. To improve the event, one reader suggested approaching downtown businesses and Explore Alexandria Tour-

ism to donate to the cause. Another big way to help is to volunteer. It takes many hands to pull off a free community event like this and the museum would greatly appreciate more help. Amanda Seim, the museum executive director, pointed that out in a news release: "We weren't without a few hiccups this year," she said, "so if anyone would like to volunteer for next year's event, please reach out to the museum." Seim also plans to get more downtown businesses to get involved in the event, following the lead of Real Estate by Jo, which provided hot coffee and cocoa, and Doug's Kettle Korn. Seim said new unique additions are in the works for next year. She's also open to any suggestions or feedback. Call the museum at 320-763-3160.

Freemasons step up

Thumbs up: The Alexandria Area Freemasons made a big donation to the new Veterans Memorial Park that will break ground this spring. All 104 of its members voted to donate \$20,000 and the amount was matched by the Grand Lodge of Minnesota. It's the biggest donation in the 150-year history of the local lodge. With such a generous gift, the Freemasons demonstrated one of their three

great principles — relief, which states that "Freemasons are taught to practice charity, and to care, not only for their own, but also for the community as a whole, both by charitable giving and by voluntary efforts and works as individuals." To make your own donation to the park, mail your check to Veterans Memorial Park, P.O. Box 733, Alexandria, MN 56308, or email alexvetsmemorial@gmail.com or call Russ Oorlog at 763-494-3576 or Gabe Pipo at 320-815-7943.

Handy tip

Thumbs Up: An Alexandria woman sent us a helpful hint for those who aren't so steady while standing on chairs to wash their walls and ceilings. "I get a dust broom, tie an old towel onto it, after folding the sides in and twisting it around the broom handle, and get it wet with hot water in the sink," she said. "I squeeze out the extra water, spray it with foam or regular window solvent. Then just slide the broom back and forth until it gets dirty or starts to dry out. Then put it back under the hot water, refoam or spray and repeat the process. It works slicker than a greased pig." She added the trick also works for cleaning floors.

Submitting letters to the editor

The Echo Press encourages readers to voice their opinions through letters to the editor. Please, however, keep your letters brief and to the point. Letters of more than 300 words or excessively long letters may be edited to a shorter form by the newspaper staff. Personal attacks against private individuals will not be printed. All letters must be signed and include the writer's address and telephone number. Letters published will include the writer's name and the city of residence only. Writers are limited to publishing one letter every 30 days. Submissions can be emailed to aedenloff@echopress.com or submitted to the Echo Press office at 225 7th Ave. E., Alexandria, MN 56308. For information, call (320) 763-3133.