

Perham Focus, “Bricks and Clicks” series outline

JCPenney. Herberger’s. Target. They started dropping off like flies throughout the lakes area. But when Norby’s Department Store in Detroit Lakes announced they’d be going out of business after 112 years earlier this year, it stopped us in our tracks. This family-owned anchor to DL’s vibrant downtown had survived every single shopping trend, not to mention two great wars and the great depression. But it couldn’t withstand this. Online shopping, Amazon in particular, has been chipping away at local businesses for quite some time, and Norby’s and other closings led to us asking, “What can we do?” And we asked lots of questions.

What we’ve found is that it’s not all doom and gloom. Business owners and communities are adapting to the ever-changing world and retail, specifically Bricks and Mortar buildings, are not dead. Lakes area communities like Perham and Alexandria and many others nearby still have thriving retail markets. Sure, some of the stores have changed names or changed hands, but the lakes area communities have plenty to offer local and seasonal shoppers.

Today is the first of our three-part series, Bricks and Clicks, designed to educate our readers on what’s happening in retail in the lakes area. Our goal is to explain the challenges, the successes, and what’s being done in our communities by business owners and local governments to combat what Perham Economic Development Director Chuck Johnson describes as the “8,000-pound gorilla,” Amazon.

This series will be presented over three installments. Today’s Part 1 looks at the challenges of what retail business owners are facing. Parts 2 and 3 will explore what’s working in our markets and what’s being done by local governments to help business owners.

We find it fitting that this series kicks off during the biggest shopping week of the year. Did you read this or the advertisements inside today’s paper first? We’re guessing the ads. But we’re glad you’re here, too. We wanted to give you an in-depth look at what’s happening with retail at a time when retail spending is on a lot of your minds.

The dollars you spend locally are so important. We hope this series will encourage you to shop local as often as you’re able, whether it’s purchasing Christmas gifts for friends and family, or everyday necessities. If nothing else, we hope these stories will make you pause and think about a purchase before you look at something in a local store and buy the same item online. You might be convinced after reading these stories that keeping those dollars in your community is so vital that it changes your spending habits. That’s our hope. That you learn about the importance of shopping local, what it means to buy elsewhere and make the best decision for you and the communities you call home.

As some businesses are closing, others are popping up. What are they? Why are they confident coming into a market that has seen others shut down? Who are the success stories and what is the secret to thriving through the “Amazon” times? Does local, state or federal government play a role in the survival of mom and pop shops? If so, how much of a role? Which challenges are shared among other lakes-area communities? Exactly how many empty storefronts do we have in our communities? Who are these experts traveling around the country advising small business owners on how to remain viable? What do these business owners have to do to compete with the big dogs that sit online and are so incredibly convenient? And when it comes down to it, will bricks ever be as popular as clicks again?

Our mission

- Encourage more citizens to shop local
- Help businesses generate ideas from others on how to combat Amazon.com and other online retailers
- Generate discussion among citizens and business owners on the topic

How we'll accomplish our mission

- A three-part editorial series looking at the issue local retailers are facing in the wake of the explosion of online shopping, which will include both a regional and local look at what's happening, what's working and what efforts are being made to keep money in the community.
- An accompanying editorial with each of the three parts to encourage shoppers to spend their money locally, as well as educate them on what happens when they choose not to do that.
- After the series runs, a campaign of house ads to continue to push people to shop local and keep that on top of mind.
- We will leverage Forum Communications Co. readership to reach as many readers as possible through sharing our series with Forum News Service in newspapers and websites, as well as encouraging others in our company to look at this issue in their areas.
- Strengthen our ties with community leaders, chamber members and local business owners to foster a “together we are stronger” attitude as business evolution continues so that the newspaper and our community members are the change we'd all like to see.