Reflections on Small Business Saturday

Small Business Saturday has now come and gone. It came on what is typically the busiest shopping weekend of the year, sandwiched between Black Friday and Cyber Monday. In its second year, the American Express-sponsored push aims to get consumers spending in smaller shops the Saturday after Thanksgiving, in lieu of Black Friday, to revitalize the shop-local tradition and infuse local economies. Participating small businesses around the country were encouraged to offer deals to entice shoppers, and in the process build a foundation for a new holiday shopping tradition.

My question to small business owners is did you see a benefit? I have gotten very mixed reactions from those I have had an opportunity to ask. Certainly the type of business affected the experience. Some businesses find it more beneficial than others. My next question is did you participate? Like many initiatives, it is hard to reap any benefit if you stand on the side of the street and watch. And then my last question is how are you planning to keep the momentum of this once-a-year creative promotion to lure shoppers and convert those one-day walk-ins into loyal, year-round customers and keep it going?

So, what can be learned from this experience? Maybe the first thing is that you need to decide to participate and take advantage of the greater initiative. Maybe you could make a special day for your customers by creating a theme that matches your business. If you own a gift store, have a local artist come in and sign copies of a new painting or craft. Consider partnering with a complementary business. For example, if you run a specialty cheese shop, partner with a neighboring wine store for a wine and cheese tasting. Or, if you offer cosmetics, partner with a local store that sells jewelry to put together a holiday party and offer a discount on your cosmetics and all of the items used that day.

If you can’t match the box stores’ prices, counter with better service. Customers may shop at a store once because of a low price, but they often become repeat shoppers because of great customer service. Ensure that your employees are not only polite but knowledgeable about your products and sales. If customers ask where an item is, have your employees lead them to where it’s located and wait to see if they have other questions.

Take advantage of your “local” identity by getting involved in community projects, you not only help your neighbors but also help your business through free advertising. Create a flier for Small Business Saturday or other special community days and help spread the word about why buying small and local is good for the community. Support fundraisers by donating goods and services or share your expertise and experience through your local Chamber of Commerce. Practice what you preach and support other small businesses in your area. Building a relationship with these businesses can create a wider net for word-of-mouth advertising and provide a platform to learn and share best practices. If space allows, share local advertising such as pamphlets, fliers, posters and business cards on bulletin boards, windows or countertops in your store.

One advantage of being local is that it’s easier to stay close to your customers, not only face to face but also through social media. Use social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to advertise flash
sales, last-minute deals and other time-sensitive offers. And don’t forget email alerts.

You may be surprised to find out that Small Business Saturday can continue long after the close of business on that one day. Develop a plan to convert those customers who visited your store on Saturday into long-term customers by capturing their e-mail addresses and mobile phone numbers and getting them to follow you through social media. Start a loyalty program and entice them to sign up with a discount or some other reward.

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