



Virginia

Technical Brief
Spring 2011

Virginia Main Street

MONITOR

Buy Local: Build Community

Strengthening Main Street through shop local strategies

On Main Street, economic development meets community stewardship. A commitment to preserving historic structures and improving the traditional downtown core can create jobs and increase tax dollars—revenues that support the institutions and infrastructure of the very place that many shoppers care about most.

Used successfully across the country, *shop local* or *buy local* campaigns emphasize this nexus. Through educational messages, rewards programs, and discounting tools such as coupons, the initiatives encourage consumer

and business-to-business spending with local merchants. However, because nonprofit organizations cannot focus primarily on economic development, it's important that the goals of a shop local strategy be positioned as doing the valuable community development work of which it is capable.

This Virginia Main Street *Monitor* technical brief will take a look at the shop local strategy, with a specific eye to how it can be employed to achieve important outcomes for the health of Main Street districts and the nonprofit groups created to foster it.

Create a shop local campaign to:

- build community commitment,
- strengthen the network of stakeholders, and
- develop merchant-leaders.



Build community commitment

Place matters. At the heart of every community initiative that pursues the Main Street Four Point Approach® is the understanding that the downtown district is a special place worthy of investment. The inherent value of each place comes from its unique physical assets, the dedicated and talented people who live and work there, and the values shared by those people. A shop local campaign can help to increase a resident's commitment to all three.

1: Commitment to place

A shop local campaign is an internal campaign, strengthening the ties of residents to the place by reminding them of what's available in their traditional community center. That includes shops and restaurants, but by also drawing on major institutions, public spaces, and traditions, a campaign is more likely to connect emotionally, tapping and priming community pride.

The City of Staunton packaged their shop local campaign as part of the coordinated "As U Like It" strategy that raises awareness of the district as home to a rich architectural heritage and the American Shakespeare Center, with visual references to its identity as the Queen City. The extended taglines, "As you like it, with people you like," and "As you like it, when you want it," draw on the unique market position of the community, encouraging residents to shop within the district, after five o'clock, and with local

merchants. It says that buying local in Staunton happens during the extended hours of merchants, at the box office of the Blackfriars, in the restaurants and grocers of the district, and at the tables of hand-picked produce set up at the Farmer's Market in the Wharf parking lot on Saturday mornings.

"Our place itself is one of our biggest selling points," says Staunton Downtown Development Association (SDDA) Executive Director Julie Markowitz. "The streetscape makes shopping here a unique experience. By calling attention to our historic structures and special places, and creating some excitement on the street, we're encouraging residents to take a new look at a special place they may have become accustomed to. It's refreshing."

And it's meaningful. Without tying a shop local campaign to the traditions, public spaces, and community identity of a district, the effort can come off as a hollow attempt at cooperative marketing, one not worthy of a community benefit nonprofit.



Staunton merchants Susan and Erin Blanton use the Staunton Buy Locally campaign to promote the district as well as Pufferbellies, the toy and book store they operate near Staunton's Wharf. Read a [November 2010 merchant profile](#) of Pufferbellies on the Virginia Main Street blog.



2: Commitment to each other

Use a shop local campaign to increase commitment across members of the community. Community attachment has been shown to increase with the level of social trust. Researchers such as Harvard public policy professor Robert Putnam advocate supporting local merchants as a way to increase both. (See number 4 on the *Better Together* list of [150 Things you can do to build Social Capital](#).)

Simply getting members of the community to know each other is a start, and you can facilitate that with a simple introduction. For instance, when highlighting businesses, present the people behind the operation. Highlight their personal stories on your website, in newsletters and through the media.

by connecting residents to the merchants through their personal stories. After all, merchants and the residents most likely to support them are neighbors, and by highlighting merchants as people, not just businesses—a shop local campaign is an effective community builder.

The Luray effort produced a series of merchant profiles in the *Page News and Courier*. In a “Faces of Main Street” profile, a reader is more likely to learn that Virginia Gift Shop Proprietor Ann Baukhages’ grandfather supplied electricity to Luray Caverns in 1904 than what she has on the shelves of her shop. “The Faces of Main Street” series is archived on the LDI website at www.luraydowntown.com.

LURAY DOWNTOWN INITIATIVE

THE FACES

of Main Street

The Luray Downtown Initiative was formed to facilitate rehabbing the town through the Virginia Main Street program. This feature is an introduction to some of the folks that form the fabric of Luray's Downtown ...

WHO: Chef Charles Arnaud
WHAT: Main Street Bakery and Catering
WHERE: 127 E. Main St.
HOW LONG: 1 1/2 years; "The New Kid in Town"

DID YOU KNOW?: Charles has strong family ties to the Shenandoah Valley. His roots lie in the Edinburg and Woodstock areas. He has toured the U.S. and Europe with country music artists Kathy Mattea, Emmylou Harris, and Marie Osmond as their lighting director. And he has shot video and film with Celine Dion and Johnny Cash.

WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT DOWNTOWN LURAY?

The town is small and quaint. I know everyone. It's full of friendly and caring people. I can walk anywhere and get all my day-to-day business done with the local merchants. There are cool shops with more on the horizon. I love this town.

This feature is produced in cooperation with the Luray Downtown Initiative. For information, contact Starr Johnson at 540-743-5158

Communities with a locally published newspaper are fortunate to have this natural ally in getting out the message. Newspaper publishers have much the same goal as stewards of the downtown district, and many come at it with the same amount of heart.

Luray Downtown Initiative (LDI) capitalized effectively on their newspaper not just by releasing press releases on the importance of supporting local merchants, but

If partnership with the newspaper is not an option, the profiles can be paid for as advertising, produced as web pieces on a blog or website, or printed in an organizational newsletter. Downtown Blackstone's website (www.downtownblackstone.com) features attractive links to individual YouTube videos highlighting a dozen of the town's merchants. The videos can be inexpensive and effective. Downtown Blackstone, Inc. produced theirs with the volunteer talents of a young intern.

Among other potential venues for introducing merchants to the community include posters in public spaces, slides as part of movie theatre pre-shows, and local cable television interview shows.

3: Commitment to shared values

Closely held community values are often more difficult to draw on as a launching point for community action than more pragmatic positioning such as cost savings and tax reductions. (That's why it takes a half a page of copy to explain the less tangible value of fair-trade goods compared

to the low-price sticker that quickly sells a competing product.) Establishing shared values and prompting the consumer to act on those values requires work, but it's worth it.

In Culpeper, a well-organized shop local campaign emphasizes the community commitment that supports the local community. Susan Bernhardt, merchant and committee member of Culpeper Renaissance Initiative (CRI), told the Star-Exponent during the October launch of the "Be a Culpeper Local" effort, "Many of my customers [at [The Cameleer](#)] do not realize when I collect 5 percent sales tax 1 percent comes back to the county and another 1 percent comes back to the school system."

In addition to introducing the shop local benefit as a dollar value for the general fund and schools (a case they make quite well), the *Be a Culpeper Local* campaign also highlights less tangible benefits based in community values. For instance, in making the case, marketing materials state that the owners of local businesses, "frequently join local civic groups, serve on local boards, attend public meetings and volunteer their time, expertise, services and merchandise to community causes." Our experience tells us this is true, but how often is engagement in the community discussed as a shared value, one that should be supported and rewarded?

For more values shared among Culpeper locals, including conservation of the environment and an appreciation for the unique, visit www.beaculpeperlocal.com.



Strengthen the stakeholder network

Teamwork makes dreams work. There's no I in team. United we stand, divided we fall. There's no shortage of shopworn adages regarding the value of collective action. They can come off as hokey and trite, but that doesn't make them less true. The district depends on a critical mass of pedestrian activity, preserved historic structures, and open, thriving businesses.

No one in a traditional commercial district is better poised to bring together diverse interests for the benefit of the community than the nonprofit Main Street organization. When a shop local campaign is rolled out, it is one more opportunity to

- extend and strengthen the Main Street network, and
- improve lines of communication among this important group of community stakeholders.

Extend the network

The invitation to become involved should be consistent and constant. The minute someone feels that an organization or a project is not for them, you lose them—maybe for the length of the project, maybe for good. Letting someone become part of a project like a shop local campaign is easy, and it can happen in small steps. To get involved at first, no one has to join a committee or lead a charge. An introductory action is all you are asking for at first, and in a shop-local campaign, that basic request may be the person's introduction to your organization. Reward their actions. Let them show off their connection to the campaign. Then encourage them to take the next step.

Brand merchants: Give every local merchant the tools to identify his or her business with the collective shop-local effort. Even if the merchant has never wanted to get involved in Main Street activities before, now might be a good time to engage him or her. Remember, as nonprofits and committees created for the benefit of the community, Main Street organizations provide services to everyone in

the district, not just those who are already involved or who pay a membership fee. Tools that can make the merchant feel a part of the effort with minimal investment include window stickers, electronic emblems that they can include in their individual advertising, listings on directories and maps of local businesses, and strategic promotion online via social media outlets.

Brand shoppers: A good campaign logo representing the district can also become an emblem for individuals. If a shopper feels good about supporting their community, they'll gladly carry a shopping bag with the shop local campaign logo on the side. They may be happy to wear a sticker on the day they made a local purchase or even put a window sticker on a car. Similarly, shoppers now have online identities as well. Give them an opportunity to become a friend on Facebook and "like" your organization or issue.

Now is a great time to experiment with emerging technologies. With the rise of the smart phone, people are learning what it can do. At locations likely to attract techies, try using a quick response (or QR) code at the cash register to engage shoppers as supporters and a marketing audience. You can do this with a campaign website or even a simple Facebook page. Using your phone's bar code scanner, scan the code below to become a friend of DHCD on Facebook. You'll be included in the agency's update stream.



Quick Response codes like the one above are available for any URL, and can be generated free online at <http://qrcode.kaywa.com/>

Engage new volunteers: Once you've begun to share information with new community members, try posting a call for volunteers. Include specific job descriptions and organizational needs, and see what you come up with. You never know until you ask. For an audience who self selected because they believe in your work and message, it may be a good idea to first ask for involvement and mission-related commitments before asking for a donation. But now that we've mentioned it, do that, too.

Engage new donors: A shop local campaign has its own expenses, and they should be added to the list of fundable components available for underwriting. Don't forget to include giving as a way that shop local enthusiasts can take action, and work with individuals, service clubs, businesses, and funders to support the effort financially.

Fun fact: Social engagement in walkable communities

An article from the most recent issue of the scholarly journal, *Applied Research in Quality of Life* looks at the connection between social capital and walkable neighborhoods.

The article, "Examining Walkability and Social Capital as Indicators of Quality of Life at the Municipal and Neighborhood Scales," by University of New Hampshire (UNH) researchers Rogers, Gardner, Carlson and Halstead, is based on research among 700 residents in 20 neighborhoods in Durham, New Hampshire. The study correlated important aspects of social capital such as participation in community events and trust in neighbors with the degree of walkability of the neighborhood. Those living near the amenities likely to be found in a historic or traditional commercial district—such as libraries, restaurants, stores and schools—are more likely to participate in community activities.

Now, it's impossible to tell if there's a cause and effect relationship from just this little bit of data but it might just be enough to justify targeting some volunteer and membership outreach to the neighborhoods immediately surrounding your district. [Click here to read the full UNH press release.](#)

Improve communications

Something we know about social capital: effective networks are developed through practice. The abilities to enlist volunteers and get the word out in an emergency are strong when they are well practiced in non-emergency times. The phone tree that announces a change in the time of the parade practice run can be employed to rally sandbaggers when the river rises. (Did that say phone-tree?) While that example is a bit antiquated in the age of Facebook, Twitter, and text messaging, the point remains the same: by building a local communications network, you are strengthening an important community muscle.

Building a List:

Contact management is not a very glamorous topic, but it's a fundamental piece of what you have to do to effectively run a campaign or an organization. Options include online subscription software companies and desktop database programs. Both require a constant and systemic approach to maintaining an up-to-date list in which contacts can be distinguished by interests and participation level. As you collect contact information and Facebook friends in your emerging campaign, be strategic.

There's no harm in sharing contact information with relevant merchants, as long as those whose information you're sharing know in advance that you'll be doing it. Never simply sign people up on a mailing list without their permission. Let them "opt in" by telling you they want to receive information. If you are sharing coupons and important information, they'll often be fine with a limited amount of email. If merchants prefer to maintain their own mailing list, don't hesitate to ask them to send out your newsletter with an invitation and link for signing up.

Speaking and Listening:

Communication is a two-way street at the very least. With the tools available, encourage individuals to tell you what they are doing to shop locally. They'll model the way for others to voluntarily promote local businesses. Ask the

question on Twitter or Facebook. "Hey Shoppers, What local deals are out there today?" Word of mouth is a strong advertising tool. Consider using your shop local campaign to strengthen it in its various forms for your district and its businesses.

Show that you are listening. If someone asks a question on your Facebook page, respond promptly and visibly for the community to see. Or it may be that the question has no "right" answer. Consider if it may be one best thrown back to the community. Facilitating a community conversation is an appropriate role for a Main Street organization.

Promote the individual to promote the group

To get the word out in encouraging downtown shopping, go beyond the general educational message to promote individual businesses. Remember that it's not just the business itself that you are promoting; but rather the person behind the business. Each business has very interesting stories about your district. Help them share them in newsletters and other activities.

Don't forget the important work of service clubs. As the *Be a Culpeper Local* campaign points out, service clubs such as the local Rotary and Kiwanis club are composed of business leaders in the community. Spotlight a business by spotlighting the broader community leadership they provide, and soon their whole club will be buying local.



Connecting Uptown Merchants to New Friends

At the same time it helps businesses and communities deliver their messages around the globe, the World Wide Web can also strengthen *local* ties.

More than 4,600 Facebook members follow Uptown Martinsville, the central business district in the heart of Henry County. That's an impressive number in a city of fewer than 15,000 residents. What keeps them engaged?

Martinsville Uptown Revitalization Association (MURA) Administrative Assistant Liz Secrest, who manages the "[Uptown Martinsville](#)" Facebook presence, works to ensure that there is at least one post every day, keeping the conversation going with a variety of fresh content. Recent posts have covered new offerings by local Uptown businesses, the opening of a new restaurant, the winners of the holiday window competition, a 5K charity run that took place in the district, and photographs of the recent work on the old courthouse, a well-loved historic landmark. "Of course, we also promote our own events, including the Farmer's Market and the TGIF concert series," says Secrest, "but, we really try to keep it about the place itself, not just the organization."



Build merchant leadership

In addition to strengthening commitment to the district and the group identity of stakeholders, shop local campaigns can build leadership among both consumers and merchants.

Consumers as community leaders

Think of a successful shop local campaign as a foot in the door with potential allies, volunteers, committee members, and board members. Consumers who respond to a shop local message are likely to value the broader goals that Main Street communities hold for their traditional commercial districts.

Consider the shop local educational component as one piece of an outreach strategy. Track shoppers who are responding to your message: encourage the use of a coupon or a discount phrase that helps merchants identify responsive shoppers. Then encourage the next step with one or two of these suggestions:

- Reward the shopper with an "I shop local" sticker or inexpensive reusable shopping bag. Help them model the way for others.
- Give merchants talking points to encourage shoppers to take the next step by
 1. Encouraging others to shop locally,
 2. Attend an upcoming Main Street meeting or event, or
 3. Shop at another store while they are in the district.
- Capture their contact information with online forms or clipboards at merchant locations, and follow up with them with Main Street news and offers.

Every active community member had an entry point to their civic participation, something that engaged and motivated him or her to get involved. An enjoyable shopping experience with a local merchant who obviously cares about the community can easily be that gateway. Many people will tell you that they've never really been asked to get involved. Use the shop local campaign as an opportunity to do so and build your bench of emerging community leaders.

Merchants as community leaders

National Trust Main Street Center Senior Program Officer Kathy LaPlante points out that, “The main job of your downtown merchants is to run a successful business.” In doing so, they are setting a community example of the potential and value of local entrepreneurship. The work you do as a Main Street program—especially through a shop local campaign—supports them in that effort. That said, there are also ways that you can use your campaign to establish a structure and raise the bar for merchant leadership.

In Lynchburg, the Retail and Restaurant Committee began in January 2010 as a group closely allied and aligned with the Main Street organization, Lynch’s Landing. But it is not run by the organization. Given a meeting room and administrative support, the merchants have the necessary space to identify, decide upon, and lead their own promotional efforts. That’s the space in which leadership emerges.



Deborah Fears Keeling of Accents Flag and Gifts leads the retail promotions charge in Lynchburg.

The district’s recent Downtown Diva promotion—a girl’s night out for shopping and entertainment—was the result of the structure, and according to committee member, Deborah Fears Keeling, “it’s important that someone step up and show they care enough to put the work into the effort.

Then more participation follows.” For more information on the effort and Keeling, see the [Virginia Main Street Merchant Profile of her store, Accent Flags and Gifts](#).

In Harrisonburg, dining promotions provided an avenue for merchant leadership in 2010. Dave Miller, owner of [Dave’s Downtown Taverna](#), chairs the Downtown Dining

Alliance (DDA), which was established in 2009. The group is organized around the philosophy that success breeds success—the restaurants can all be stronger if they work together.

Miller developed a Google group list serve so that restaurant owners can email and support each other. For instance, when new Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) regulations are rolled out, or if a promotional opportunity arises with James Madison University, any restaurant owner can share the information with his or her colleagues.

Recently Miller led this group of restaurateurs in launching the



commonwealth’s first website approved to publish alcohol and bar specials. The site, www.DoDowntown.net, was designed by SOS Advertising, a Harrisonburg agency which still hosts the site and receives no fee from the restaurants. The compensation-free structure allows the site to publish drink deals. Miller led the way and footed the legal bill while working with the ABC. He now has the approval letter from the ABC framed in his trophy case. The site builds on the Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance (HDR) brand, yet remains independent, touting downtown dining at local eateries and demonstrating the power of the merchant leader.

One final note:

Remember: Your main role in encouraging the community to support the local merchants of the downtown district, and generally in revitalizing downtown, is to help others take ownership. That means merchants, residents, shoppers, property owners, other organizations—all of the stakeholders.

It’s their downtown. Downtown is their unique and special place, one worth investing in, preserving and caring for. And it’s certainly a good place to shop.

Five tips for supporting and developing merchant leadership



1. Listen, Listen, Listen

- Provide an open door and a friendly ear for merchants.
- There may be actions you can take to support their efforts as business and property owners. Deliver when you say you will.
- Sit in on conversations in which merchants talk with each other to develop their own strategies.

2. Provide resources

- Provide a positive attitude. It's infectious, and it fosters a sense of possibility in the district.
- Periodically provide space and snacks for merchant meetings.
- Encourage a merchant committee to set their own agenda and lead their own meetings. If you have a merchant association already active in your community, partner with them in generous and meaningful ways.
- Offer to take and distribute the minutes.

3. Provide a structure

- Break down larger strategies into manageable tasks or chunks.
- Consider a block captain strategy in which merchants can volunteer to lead efforts in their part of the district.
- Help track success measurements for the group.

4. Connect your goals to their strategies

- Once merchants have established their own goals, build them into the organizational workplan.
- Show merchants how their efforts fit the Main Street approach.

5. Acknowledge & reward

- Arrange for public acknowledgement and reward for merchant-leaders. This might be at a Main Street gathering, a council meeting or other community event.
- Don't forget to arrange press and run an article on the website or in the newsletter.

Some valuable shop local resources online



American Independent Business Alliance (AMIBA)

The American Independent Business Alliance, online at www.amiba.net, is a membership-based model for independent businesses. You can subscribe to their newsletter and access some resources online. The focus of this group is local and independent.



Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE)

The Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE), another membership network of local independent businesses sponsors Buy Local Week nationally, complete with free tools that can be downloaded and used as part for your local participation in the event. The organization's website, www.livingeconomies.com, features past newsletters and subscription services such as online leakage calculators.



Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR)

The New Rules Project of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR), online at www.newrules.org, offers a policy and sector-based approach to local self-reliance movement. Sign up for the periodic online newsletter featuring relevant articles and research from around the country.



The 3/50 Project

The 3/50 Project includes general campaigns to encourage local shopping at independent merchants and specific holiday and sector promotions, including one for independent bike shops. The tools for this project, including fact sheets for educational campaigns are available online at www.the350project.net. Access free materials online by agreeing to the project's terms of service.



National Trust Main Street Center

The go-to source for Main Street communities, the National Trust Main Street Center has a wide variety of economic restructuring and merchant support tools online at www.mainstreet.org, including the May 2009 Main Street News coverage of shop local efforts, and sample program structures.



Small Business Development Center Network

A Virginia Main Street partner, the Small Business Development Center Network (www.virginiasbdc.org) offers valuable training resources for downtown merchants through STAMP: the Small Town and Merchant Program. The stronger the merchant community is, the easier it will be to attract visitors and shoppers to take part in your downtown experience. Through the partnership the training services of leading retail consultants are made available to designated Main Street Communities. For more information contact [Jeff Sadler](mailto:Jeff.Sadler@mainstreet.org).



The Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development's Main Street Program provides downtown revitalization technical assistance to Virginia communities, using the National Main Street Center's Four Point Approach™ (Organization, Promotion, Design & Economic Restructuring) for comprehensive preservation-based revitalization of historic commercial districts.

Jeff Sadler

Program Manager

Jeff.Sadler@dhcd.virginia.gov

(804) 371-7040

Kyle Meyer

Program Administrator

Kyle.Meyer@dhcd.virginia.gov

(804) 371-7041

Doug Jackson

Program Administrator

Douglas.Jackson@dhcd.virginia.gov

(276) 780-3244

Web site

www.dhcd.virginia.gov/MainStreet

Blog

www.dhcdvms.wordpress.com



**VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING
AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

Partners for Better Communities

www.dhcd.virginia.gov

Virginia Main Street

Building Economic Vitality Downtown