



The Internet Threat to Our (and Every) Community

An article I happened upon in *Time* magazine makes a salient analogy that I think is worth recounting as we approach the holiday shopping season.

The *Time* headline is “Buying Local: How It Boosts the Economy,” and the article is largely based on research by the New Economics Foundation, an independent think tank in London, England.

The analogy: “Money is like blood. It needs to keep moving around to keep the economy going.” When too much money is spent outside the community, the analogy continues, “it flows out, like a wound,” resulting in “ghost towns’ (areas devoid of neighborhood shops and services) or ‘clone towns,’ where Main Street now looks like every other Main Street with the same fast-food and retail chains.”

The article makes the point that many local economies are suffering not from lack of money coming in, but rather too much money going out — to such entities as big supermarkets, non-locally owned utilities, and to online retailers.

I bring this up now because online holiday shopping is rising at an alarming rate.

From 2005 to 2013, retail e-commerce sales at holiday time increased from \$19.6 billion to \$46.55 billion. Last year, when overall holiday sales increased by 4 percent, online sales were up more than 10 percent, and Black Friday scored the biggest online sales day in history.

(Two interesting side notes: The share of purchases made on mobile devices — phones and tablets — grew by 50 percent, and the biggest regional growth in online shopping continues to be in the Midwest.)

Overall, in 2012, there were 191 million digital shoppers in the U.S. and they spent \$593 billion online. No surprise: Both numbers are getting bigger every year.

It is not hard to extrapolate what this could mean if the trends continue for, say, another 10 years, especially for towns and small cities. My guess is the aforementioned “ghost towns” with an occasional shop hanging on, a local restaurant or two, and even more bars.

I believe that Bloomington can escape this fate, because we know we have something special here and we would hate to see it destroyed. A downtown filled with boarded-up storefronts is not something any of us wants to see.

So this holiday season, resist the siren song emanating from your computer, get off your fanny, and do as much shopping at local stores as you can. Keep our money here and out of the corporate coffers in New York, Dallas, and elsewhere. Do it for Bloomington. Do it for yourself. Let’s stop the bleeding.

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