



Seven-Step Playbook

for Successful “Discover Local” Initiatives

Ditch your “Shop Local” campaigns for a “Discover Local” initiative to create lasting change in consumer behavior.



INTRODUCTION:

Why “Shop Local” Campaigns Don’t Work

The Problem

While *Shop Local* campaigns may generate a slight bump in local sales for a few weeks, the results are usually mediocre and temporary. This is not a criticism of the people running these campaigns. They are likely doing as good a job as anyone could. The problem is, instead, with the nature of the *Shop Local* campaign itself.

Framing

The simple reason that most *Shop Local* campaigns are not successful is that they are inherently built on guilt.

Support local businesses.
Keep dollars in the community.

These messages focus on the wrong thing. They are born out of the needs of the businesses, not out of the needs of the consumer.

When a *Shop Local* campaign asks consumers to buy local, it’s akin to the ask of a nonprofit organization. It’s an appeal for support, for donation even, because it’s the right thing to do. But people rarely make purchasing decisions because they feel obligated to help someone else. And while such a campaign may generate a few local sales from supportive citizens, it will likely have no lasting impact on local consumer behavior.

Additionally, most *Shop Local* campaigns shoot themselves in the foot right out of the gate by positioning the local small business as something that needs support in the first place. Such a campaign is inadvertently introducing and putting forward the idea that the local option is lesser by nature. Then, the campaign attempts to overcome that very notion (that it is putting forward) with an appeal to social responsibility. It’s a self-defeating marketing framework, and the underlying message is “Please accept a compromise for the greater good.”

If communities want residents to spend more money locally, they need to stop positioning local options as inherently worse but somehow worthy. They need to stop

framing the sell like an ask. They need to stop designing messaging based on the needs of business owners or the needs of the community. Instead, they need to identify and sell the clear and undeniable consumer benefits of buying from the specific businesses in the local area.

While local economic impact will be the outcome of a successful effort (and the justification for the use of public dollars), it is definitely not the motivation of the primary audience of the campaign (local consumers). Community pride is important, yes. Supporting local businesses is a good thing, no doubt. But these messages should be secondary. They should reinforce purchasing decisions, not drive them. Consumers buy value.

Shop Local campaigns should be about identifying and promoting the specific differentiated value of each of the specific businesses in your area. Then the social and collective idea of “supporting small businesses” can be a bonus.

Differentiation

To be successful in business is to put forward and deliver a clear value proposition. A value proposition is built on a specific differentiation. No business can be all things to all people. Successful businesses focus on being great at something specific. Then the marketplace knows what they are and when they are the best option (and for whom).

For example, everyone knows the difference between Walmart and Tiffany. They both sell jewelry, but they are very different. There are people who shop at one and not the other, and there are people who shop at both. But everyone understands the difference. They are not competitors. Walmart sells selection, convenience, and price. Tiffany sells status, experience, and luxury.

When Target hit the scene, it was unclear how they would differentiate from Walmart. They also focus on selection, convenience, and price. But they managed to differentiate themselves masterfully from Walmart by being a level-up version. Target is the wealthier Walmart. Regardless of where you shop, everyone understands the difference between Walmart and Target. We all understand when to go to Target and when to go to Walmart. This differentiation is good for consumers, and it's good for the businesses as well. Each has its own space in which to thrive.

I live in York, SC, where the grocery store options are limited. We have two Food Lions, a Walmart, and a handful of Dollar Generals. Then, on the other extreme, we have a wonderful farm-to-retail store called Black's Peaches. The Black family has farmed the same land since the late 1700s, and they've had a retail spot there since the 1920s. They have a great little restaurant and ice cream parlor. They have hay rides and pick-your-own events. They carry products from small farms all over the county and beyond. It's a great spot. Similarly, we have Bush-n-Vine, another local farm-to-grocery on the edge of town. And we have others too. We have a thriving ecosystem of small farms all over the western side of the county.

Black's Peaches and their peers are in a fundamentally different category than Food Lion. That doesn't mean that one is good and one is bad. It means that each has value for different reasons. Black's tastes better (the fruit and lettuce literally taste WAY better), it's safer (less processed, fewer chemicals), and it's more pleasant (with relationships, experience, and entertainment). It's experientially better. A wonderful thing to do on a Saturday is to head out to Black's Peaches. Have lunch, get ice cream, hunt through the produce and honeys, and fill a basket with food you can't wait to share with your friends and family. Nobody would ever say that about a Food Lion. That's not meant to be an insult to Food Lion. Big box grocery stores serve a specific purpose. We all know when and why we will go in one.

Differentiation is about understanding, sharpening, and articulating the specific value proposition that you offer in the context of the market. There is no characteristic that is inherently better than another. Big is not inherently better than small. Cheap is not inherently better than expensive. Fast is not inherently better than slow. It all depends on the context and framing. In weakness strength, strength weakness.

Small local businesses must create a categorical differentiation that demonstrates a different type of value that the consumer gets from the local purchase experience. This is not a temporary reality or specific promotion, but a fundamental difference that makes a particular small and local business a BETTER option sometimes, for some people, and on some occasions. Winning businesses do not simply compete harder. They position uniquely. They reframe the context to make their value the clearly superior option in some cases to some people. And they acknowledge and embrace that other options are better sometimes for some people, as well. I doubt Black's Peaches would claim that you should buy your toilet paper and household cleaners from them (I don't think they even

sell such items). But if you want a cantaloupe that tastes like heaven (and not just water), then you should go to Black's during cantaloupe season.

If your local small businesses can each develop a clear value proposition through differentiation, then your *Shop Local* efforts should be simply about showcasing and amplifying these clear messages.

Discovery

Another flaw of many *Shop Local* campaigns is that they group small businesses together into one concept – small businesses or local businesses. Then they ask the local consumer to “support local businesses” in a general way. That’s an abstract thing to support. It’s like saying Stop Global Warming or Save the Whales. It feels big, unwieldy, and disconnected to the personal experience. Yet, when someone sees that a new local restaurant has opened in their town, they check it out because it seems interesting (that specific restaurant). They don’t check it out to Support Local Business. That may be a secondary motivation or bonus, but their primary motivation is discovery and exploration of something new and interesting.

A good *Shop Local* campaign should be built on discovery. Once the businesses have clearly differentiated value propositions, then the work of the marketing initiative is to create the opportunity for local people to discover those businesses. Discovery is exciting. It’s fun. It’s compelling. It’s not about social obligation. It’s about interest and intrigue. Discovery is built on specifics. You can’t discover the general concept of small businesses. But you can discover a specific small business, like Black’s Peaches. Specificity is compelling and the key to overall success.

Consistency

Shop Local campaigns usually take place during national small business month. Or they are seasonal according to some calendar that coordinates with national efforts. This type of occasional focus will never yield permanent results.

To truly have a lasting impact on local consumer behavior, the effort can’t be a Hallmark-esque slogan that runs during some Hallmark-esque time period. Instead, the effort must be a consistent initiative that runs year round. That’s why any such effort should be an initiative and not a campaign. There should be permanent components (like

websites and other tools). There should be events scheduled throughout the year. There should be continuing coaching for small businesses to develop and articulate differentiated value. And there should be consistent marketing, promotions, and communications on a weekly, even daily, basis.

Solution

Instead of a **Shop Local Campaign**, consider developing a **Discover Local Initiative**. The goal of a successful *Discover Local* initiative should be to create lasting impact on local consumer behavior.

An effective *Discover Local* initiative serves to:

1. Help local businesses each develop and articulate a clear **differentiation** and value proposition.
2. Promote those differentiated value propositions to the local public through a strategy of **discovery** marketing.
3. Develop and manage permanent tools and a promotional effort for year-round **consistency** in marketing.

PLAYBOOK:

Seven Steps to a Successful “Discover Local” Initiative

Step 1: Shared Understanding

The folks in your community are likely familiar with *Shop Local* campaigns and how they are usually designed and operated. If you’re going to build a different type of initiative, then you will need to make the effort to get your stakeholders and participating businesses on the same page and in support of this new approach. This may require a keynote, group presentations, workshops, and more.

One strategy is to introduce the ideas of why traditional Shop Local campaigns have limited success (covered in the introduction above) at a keynote address to a large stakeholder audience. Then organize two workshops: one with the board members of the funding organization, and the other with potential participant businesses.

Step 2: Identify and Coach Participating Businesses

You need a first round of business participants. Pick them carefully, as they need to either already have a very clear differentiated value proposition or be coachable to achieve one. Businesses like Black’s Peaches (from my example above) are obvious choices to start with. They provide a clear differentiated value from their big box alternatives, and they are quintessential examples of the local experience.

You will likely need to set up a program for participating businesses to access a marketing consultant to help them identify their differentiation, develop their value proposition, and hone their messaging.

This step is critical. If your businesses do not have a clear differentiated value proposition, then all of your promotional efforts to come will have little impact.

Step 3: Develop a Differentiation Framework

As you work with your participant businesses to develop clear differentiated value, seek to uncover patterns. Look for themes that emerge across businesses and industries. These themes will become the foundation of your marketing. Themes may include:

- Expertise
- Personal relationships
- Local knowledge
- Accountability
- Unique products
- Unique experiences

These categories become part of the core messages of your campaigns. Rather than promoting businesses simply because they are local, you begin promoting the value they provide to local residents.

Step 4: Build a Storytelling Engine

The most effective campaigns are fueled by a continuous stream of stories. Develop a process for identifying and promoting:

- Business owner stories
- Customer success stories
- Community impact stories
- Behind-the-scenes content
- New business openings
- Longstanding local institutions
- Hidden gems and emerging businesses

Storytelling transforms abstract concepts into relatable examples. Consumers remember stories far longer than slogans.

Most *Shop Local* campaigns already employ the tactic of storytelling (with video, blog, social posts, etc.). The difference here is that these stories will be built around the specific differentiated value of each of the businesses, as well as the thematic differentiations that apply to all or groups of the businesses.

Also, these stories should run year-round (not just during seasonal campaigns). Behavior change requires consistency. Create a year-round content calendar that includes business spotlights, customer testimonials, community impact stories, recommendations, and event promotion. The goal is to continually reinforce the value of choosing local

businesses and to continually provide discovery moments for the people of the community.

Step 5: Create Discovery Tools

Consumers cannot support businesses they do not know exist. So, seek to develop tools that make discovery easier, such as:

- Business directories
- Interactive maps
- Local shopping guides
- Restaurant guides
- Seasonal gift guides
- Event calendars
- Mobile-friendly websites

The objective is to help residents uncover value that already exists in the community.

Step 6: Develop Signature Programs and Events

Events create opportunities for residents to experience local businesses firsthand. They also help your marketing efforts in general because they are each a fresh idea to promote, and they are usually limited in time (creating urgency).

Examples include:

- Shop Local Weeks
- Restaurant Weeks
- Business Passport Programs
- Local Gift Card Programs
- Holiday Shopping Campaigns
- Community Markets

The most successful events are designed around exploration and discovery rather than simple promotion.

Step 7: Measure Outcomes

An effective *Discover Local* initiative should include intense tracking and clear performance indicators. Possible metrics (both quantitative and qualitative) include:

- Website traffic
- Directory usage
- Event participation
- Gift card sales
- Business engagement
- Social media reach and engagement
- Business owner feedback

The purpose of measurement is not simply reporting. It is continuous improvement.

CONCLUSION:

Local Small Business Success Requires a Permanent Shift in Local Consumer Behavior

Most communities already possess extraordinary local businesses. What they often lack is a strategy for helping residents discover those businesses and understand the specific value those businesses provide.

The goal in promoting local businesses is to change local purchasing behavior over time. That requires long-term commitment, strategic coordination, and consistent execution. The communities that do this best are not running campaigns. They are building marketing systems. Those systems become a sustainable competitive advantage for the entire community.

A *Discover Local* initiative replaces guilt with value. It replaces concepts with specifics. And it replaces short-lived campaigns with a permanent system that generates consistent and residual results over time.

So drop your **Shop Local Campaigns** for a **Discover Local Initiative** and start permanently changing the purchasing behavior of your local residents to build a stronger community through small business success.

“If you need help with any of this, let me know. I’m happy to discuss.”

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