Supporting Small Business Saturday with 2020-Conscious Marketing

Image credit: Elvert Barnes

“Conscious spending with the community can contribute to neighborhood sustainability.” – Christine Araquel, The Park’s Finest

I encountered this quote from a restaurateur on the American Express Small Business Saturday website, and just these few words called a vivid image to my mind: local business owners and customers gazing together toward the horizon, hoping to pierce the clouds of COVID-19 and see them clearing away, revealing communities that are still standing, and still capable of sustaining our hometowns, our cities, and our dreams.

72% of consumers believe they will frequent neighboring businesses more after the crisis is over, but that will take all of us doing our part now to ensure as many SMBs are still there to greet us when better days return.

In Q4 of 2019, I used my column to encourage local business

owners to start having meaningful conversations with customers about how “conscious spending” at independently-owned enterprises impacts local quality of life. Buying local affects everything from mental and physical health, to emergency services access, diversity, democracy, and climate change.

In 2020, it’s time to turn up the local SEO industry’s dial on conscious spending. Today, I’m urging every business owner and marketer to consider dedicating space to a concerted educational campaign on the topic on their websites, social profiles, local business listings, reviews, and real-world interfaces. Your work, and mine, depends on sustaining independently-owned local businesses through and far beyond Small Business Saturday. With the right strategy, we can make an impactful effort together.

What is Small Business Saturday?

American Express created Small Business Saturday in 2010 in response to the Great Recession. This annual event invites communities to shop at small, local businesses on the Saturday following Thanksgiving. Small Business Saturday’s date this year is November 28th.

Americans spent $19.6 billion at independent businesses on Small Business Saturday in 2019. In 2020, AmEx is placing special emphasis on shopping locally to help SMBs remain viable amid the challenges of the public health emergency. AmEx is also strongly encouraging shoppers to support Black-owned independent businesses this year.

Practical tactics for Small Business Saturday preparation

To ensure your local business is ready to welcome the maximum number of shoppers on the big day, check these off your list:

- Do a quick audit of your website to be sure all contact information and hours of operation are current and accurate for each location of your business.
- Do the same for your local business listings on the major location data platforms.
- Write at least one Small Business Saturday Google Post to explain your special offers for the day.
- Post a Google Q&A about your participation in Small Business Saturday.
- Publicize your Small Business Saturday offers on your social channels.
- Respond to any recent reviews that mention Small Business Saturday.
- Make use of any appealing partnership deals you qualify for by participating in AmEx's official Small Business Saturday program.
- Make use of AmEx's tutorials on topics like contactless payments, answering COVID FAQs, and implementing digital shopping.

These are all standard good practices to ready your company for this major shopping day, but amid the severe challenges of 2020, it's time to go beyond common techniques.

Share-worthy Buy Local statistics

If conscious local shopping is the goal, education is the key to helping customers make informed choices.

There's never been a better year for local vendors to re-envision themselves as heroic community educators. Beyond the typical preparations you make to get ready for Small Business Saturday, now is the time to start sharing with customers why conscious shopping with you matters. Consider:

In 2012, small businesses made up 99.7% of US employer firms. SMBs with 500 or fewer employees are the backbone of the US economy.

As of August 2020, 163,735 total U.S. businesses on Yelp were reported as closed, with 97,966 reported as permanently closed due to the pandemic. Meanwhile, the last Civic Economics Prime Numbers report found that Amazon had displaced 62,000 shops and 900,000 retail jobs in just one year. Small businesses are struggling to survive the tandem challenges of COVID and monopoly.

As much as $7 billion in uncollected state and local taxes were lost in one year by local communities due to Amazon, depleting resources needed to cope with emergency and ongoing needs. Meanwhile, if every US family spent just $10 extra locally each month instead of at a big box or national chain, over $9.3 billion would be directly returned to local economies. Our hospitals, fire departments, schools, and other essentials of community life depend on having a strong tax base.

Small businesses not only create the local and state tax base essential to civic life, they also contribute 250% more than big brands to community causes. Shopping locally directly impacts services and programs you care about like first responders, food and housing security, children's resources, and animal welfare.

Make a copy of Moz's free Why Buy Local stats sheet to help you tell a compelling small business story to the communities in which you serve and market.

For local business owners: Where to educate in the run-up to Small Business Saturday 2020

Share the stories (with supporting statistics) of your choice to boost awareness of the benefits of shopping at independently-owned, local businesses in the following places:

Websites

Determine which resources matter most to the communities you serve, and explain how shopping local funds those essentials. Create a section on the homepage of your website summarizing these benefits, and link it to a landing page that expands on how conscious local shopping is sustaining the community.

For example, in my community, taxes are absolutely critical to keeping official fire departments operational, and volunteer fire departments depend on local giving. In the American West, where we've been in a constant state of disaster due to fire for months, SMBs can use their websites to draw the throughline between shopping local and funding essential emergency services. In other parts of the country, it could be flood relief, or food banks, or the survival of local newspapers.

Build a strong internal link structure pointing to your shop local landing page, and sprinkle your product and service pages with stats proving the point that choosing your business instead of a big box or online monopoly makes life better where shoppers live.

Social profiles

Bring creativity to bear in publicizing your most compelling reasons to shop local on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and other social media platforms. You don't have to guilt-trip customers into spending at independents, but you can engage them with statistics that show how shopping with you benefits the community, as well as inviting customers to tell their own stories.

Use social media to ask which services, resources, places, and causes matter most to your customers, and help locals connect the dots between where they spend and how their purchases fund whatever is valued most at a local level.

Local business listings

Concise statistics can be incorporated into the description fields of your local business listings, Google Posts, videos, photos, GMB messaging, and Google Q&A. Use these spaces to give local shoppers extra reasons to do business with you.

And, of course, be sure the basic contact information and hours of operation on your major local business listings are up-to-date before Small Business Saturday, so that first-time shoppers who like your messaging can find you without any misdirection or disappointment.

Reviews

Incorporate brief statistics into review request campaigns, encouraging respondents to voice their educated opinions on why they choose to shop locally with you.

For example, a review request might state that sales at your business contribute X amount of funding to first responders, and that you'd appreciate the reviewer writing about how supporting these services matters to them and to the community. A review corpus spangled with persuasive statements from fully-aware customers can help other shoppers choose you over corporate competitors.

Additionally, local business owners are sometimes at a loss for how to vary their "thank you" owner responses to positive reviews. Diminish repetition by including data in your replies. For example, a hypothetical owner response could read:

"So glad you enjoyed your soft tacos, Mary! Your great review is extra appreciated right now, as dining with us is also ensuring a 3% donation to our local food bank from every order. You're making a difference by helping us make sure everyone in the community has food on the table this winter.

Thank you so much for caring about our town. We hope to see you again soon!”

The new Moz Local plans will alert you to every new review that comes in on our partner networks. Use these alerts to craft timely, informative thank-you notes in your owner responses.

Real-world interfaces

Storefronts, window displays, in-store signage, menus, brochures, mailers, packaging, receipts, business cards, and many other real-world assets can convey educational statistics that will help locals choose you to support the local economy.

Google has interesting theories about the messy middle of the customer’s journey during COVID-19. Your online assets may be of most influence during the evaluation and exploration phases of the buyer’s path, but don’t overlook the messages you’re sending to customers whose attention you’ve already captured. Using tangible assets – like window displays seen by passersby – to showcase how local patronage directly sustains the community could bring you repeat business from convinced customers.

For agencies: Be more than a local SEO – be a local business advocate

Image credit Indie Bound/Raven Bookstore

Local SEO agencies know, first-hand, the difficulties they and their clients have been through in 2020. Consider Danny Caine: teacher, poet, author, and owner of The Raven Book Store in Lawrence, Kansas. Like so many independent business owners, he gives back to his community. Whether he’s serving locally-famous pie to visiting authors, or donating to restore the neighborhood church where Langston Hughes worshipped, Mr. Caine walks the hometown walk with a good heart. He’s like so many of our SMB clients.

But Danny Caine has taken community advocacy one step further than most local business owners. His letter to Jeff Bezos on the distinction between healthy competition and harmful disruption made some news. His self-published zine, How to Resist Amazon and Why, sold 10,000 copies and is now headed for formal publication as a full-length book.

While so many local search marketing agencies have been offering discounts to clients to keep them going during the pandemic, or simply seeing their SMB contracts disappear, Mr. Caine is proactively offering education to inspire conscious local shopping.

If a busy independent bookseller like Danny Caine can make the time to utilize local, social, and print media as advocacy channels, how much could skilled marketers at good agencies do to boost messaging in support of their SMB clients? Is there anything standing in our way?

Just do it

Multiple inspiring speakers at MozCon 2020 advised brands to have strong opinions and take public stands on important issues, building affinity with customers based on shared values. Mention was made of the famous Nike ad featuring abolitionist, Colin Kaepernick. In dollars and cents, the year following Nike's commercial brought them $163 million in earned media, a $6 billion brand value increase, a 31% increase in sales,

and all-time-high stock values. But it brought the country so much more than this – it role-modeled courageously doing the right thing in the face of adversity.

The local SEO industry doesn't have the same visibility as a footwear giant or a beloved superbowl quarterback. Collectively, ten of my favorite local SEOs have about 130,000

Twitter followers. What can we do, with only this much reach, to support local business owners like Danny Caine in what has become a critical, nationwide struggle of independents vs. monopoly?

Marketers: you've spent your careers developing incredible publicity skills! I want to know what your best ideas are, and I have three suggestions of my own to share to get the

conversation started:

Idea 1: Take a stand on education

Because local SEOs work in tech, we find ourselves in a work environment that sometimes reveres market disruption just for the sake of the "wow" factor. We look at our social media feeds and see our peers cheering for Amazon Prime Day because it's cool, for every Google AI development because it's cool, for big box brands because they're cool.

But for our own client base and our own communities, we know in our bones that it's the opposite of cool to see local businesses closing down and workers displaced, or to see independent business owners struggling to scrape together the budget for a competitive local search marketing campaign.

There are hundreds of good reasons not to cheerlead for the biggest competitors of independent businesses, but for local SEOs, we don't have to look further than our client rosters to choose which side to champion. Unless you're holding out in the hopes of a Fortune 500 company becoming your star client, you're already working with one or two feet in the SMB camp. So why not speak up about it?

That audience of 130,000 Twitter followers would quickly get used to seeing local SEO agencies taking bold, principled stands on the basis of ethics, civics, and local economics. What you say could begin influencing the larger worlds of SEO and digital marketing, so that the norm becomes covering market disruption with greater thoughtfulness about its impacts on local community life.

In the run-up to Small Business Saturday, why not start by sharing some Buy Local stats on your social feeds? Then, looking ahead to 2021, see how far you can take your agency in the direction of client support. I'll follow any marketer who takes the leap from local SEO to local business advocate.

Idea 2: Make your agency website a source of educational citations

Most digital marketing agencies already have some sort of portfolio, and they're often one of the most underutilized areas of the company website. Reimagined, portfolios are only a couple of steps away from becoming useful directories of structured citations for clients that could help boost their organic visibility and associated local pack rankings.

Putting the power of your agency's own PA/DA behind the local brands you want to see beating out spam and corporate competitors is a great act of SMB allyship. Your agency could:

1. Create an in-depth page for each client containing structured NAP, a link, and the best data you can amass about how choosing this SMB benefits its city of location vs. shopping with big boxes of online giants.
2. Build good internal links to these pages.
3. Seek out a few good inbound links to these pages
4. Promote these pages on your social feeds
5. Use these pages as your examples at conferences, on webinars, and podcasts in 2021

Try to build at least one of these citation pages for a favorite SMB client before Small Business Saturday so that you're templating the process. Create more in the new year and track how they're ranking in the overall scheme of your clients' unstructured citation/reputation assets.

Idea 3: Educate pro bono and educate for a fee

“I felt like I had to do more,” says Local SEO Search founder, John Vuong, and I hope you will take two minutes to watch his highly motivational video:

[embedded content]
Many local SEOs are giving knowledge and help away right now out of an honorable desire to help SMBs get through tough times. Mike Blumenthal and Mary Bowling recently discussed this on a LocalU Last Week in Local podcast:

Mary: One of the tactics that’s been used here in our little valley is having free “get your business online” things where an agency will go in and help small businesses in their area actually get online and get verified and start harvesting some of the rewards of having Google My Business set up properly. It’s a really worthwhile thing to do.

Mike: I think with just an hour a month, an agency can then both build out the listing and provide additional services including metrics that demonstrate significant key performance indicators as they build this business toward a full digital relationship.

I recommend listening to the full conversation starting at about 10:10 in the video, and to the interview by Garrett Sussman that sparked it. In completely practical terms, our industry knows that a thriving local business scene means more clients with better funding for really good marketing.

I’d suggest adding one extra ingredient into any pro bono or discounted work you’re doing for local businesses: freely share my stats sheet with independent business owners to help them better tell their own story of how shopping with them sustains community life.

Meanwhile, if you’re a local SEO who has earned enough of a

reputation to be a guest on podcasts, a speaker at webinars, or a paid presenter at conferences, build education about the vital role of independent businesses into your pitches. The more the digital marketing industry hears from us, and the more awareness we raise about the importance of conscious shopping, the better position we are putting our clients in to win.

Simmering success this year for a better Small Business Saturday in 2021

Image credit: Mark

If 2020 got in the way of you doing everything you wanted to do leading up to Small Business Saturday, consider that we've all got 12 months ahead of us before next year's event. That's 12 months to double down on educational messaging to support year-round, conscious, local shopping.

I don't want to say it will be easy – there will definitely be hurdles.

In particular, marketing on the promise of dubious convenience is as old as commerce. I've laughed at canned soup ad copy telling consumers to buy their product to avoid standing over a hot stove for hours. Education is what makes us able to spot the fiction here: when you make soup from scratch, you turn on the burner and then go about the rest of your day until it's ready to eat. Nobody, not even Jacques Pépin, actually stands glued to the stove while homemade soup simmers.

The Amazons, the big boxes, the monopolies and near-monopolies, are counting on the public going along with the fiction of convenience indefinitely and never stopping to count the cost to our communities.

Actively point out to your customer base that it's not actually more convenient to shop giant "everything stores" anymore (if it ever was?), because with the curbside pickup and home delivery revolution 2020 brought small businesses, "near me" shopping has never been easier. Highlight that we can all take a 10-minute drive to pick up an item and get ourselves out of the house, or place a quick order via the web from a local purveyor and go about the rest of our day.

At least, we can do this so long as we still have local independents to buy from, to support with our dollars, and with our serious marketing skills. The choice is ours, and the **real convenience** will be on the side of the people if we choose to build thriving tax bases, community health and safety, human well-being, and local character via locally-supported commerce.

With 12 months between Small Business Saturday 2020 and 2021, you have the time and talents to contribute to positive social change. What are your best ideas? Please share in the comments!

https://feedpress.me/link/9375/14024070/small-business-saturday-2020