

MEMO



To: Jackson County Residents and Business Owners
From: Andrew Kokas, Clarklake Resident and Business Owner
Date: 2/29/12
Re: Jackson County and the City of Jackson
Message:

True, This! —

Beneath the rule of men entirely great, the pen is mightier than the sword.

English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1839

Two more small businesses in Jackson County shut their doors last week which is bad news for all of us. One business was owned by a friend of mine. I did not know the other, although both shut-downs had the same consequence—a few more people are now out of work in Jackson which continues a distressful trend of dollars vanishing into air.

To be fair, I also learned yesterday that at least one new business will begin operations next month. It's a pawn shop that will open on Michigan Avenue just west of the Adult Book Store. I wish the owner well, but it seems like a woeful way to measure economic development when Pawn Shops, Re-Sale shops and stores like Family Dollar represent our newest enterprises.

I do not blame Wall Street, President Obama, former President Bush, a recalcitrant Congress, or my next door neighbor. It's just a fact that all of us are inclined to look out for our own self-interest. The trouble—I think—is that not enough of us have reflected on who in Jackson has the same self-interest that we do.

The answer is I do, you do and so does the JCC student, the merchant across the street and the dentist around the corner. We all live here, but some of the things we need for a healthy community are disappearing. Small businesses that provide convenient products and services, pay taxes to support our local schools and roads, and make contributions to our Little Leagues are becoming scarce. It's happening because of how frequently we forget the impact of an individual purchase decision. \$100 spent at a big box store leaves just \$14 in our local economy. The same \$100 spent at a Jackson store keeps \$68 in town. This is too big a difference to ignore.

Business owners have but three options for the future, it seems to me. We can hang on to what we've got praying things get better. We can bail out and try something different somewhere else. Or we can fight back. This letter is sent with the hope that you have a little fight left in you, and that you'd consider joining me in an effort to bring back the local economy in Jackson.

The task is not as daunting as it may seem.

Overall, the concept I am introducing is called RelyLocal.com. It's a local, interactive community website that promotes conversation between Jackson business owners and Jackson area consumers. Each local business will have its own web page, with all of us advocating for our local businesses. No chain restaurants in this group. No Big Box stores either. Our messages will contain pictures, information and video about our products and services, background about our experiences, a listing of the community activities that are occurring each and every day, plus a list of newly available jobs in Jackson, local buyer incentives and, we hope, a lot of good will. Your own individual website and Facebook page will be linked to your page on RelyLocal. Collectively, through sophisticated Search Engine Optimization, we will be strengthening the rankings of everyone's individual website on Google and other search engines.

This is all possible because of the new technologies of Web 2.0, loosely defined as the cumulative advances in web architecture that enable all of us to interact in virtual communities. Said differently, it's word-of-mouth advertising for the 21st Century. Imagine a satisfied customer telling not just his next door neighbor or family that you gave him the product or service he wanted. But he tells thousands of people with a simple post on RelyLocal or Facebook. You can never buy this kind of advertising, but you can prepare your business to enable it to occur.

The virtual community we are creating in RelyLocal is, of course, also our real community-- Jackson—where its members all live, work, drive around and decide where to get their next meal. Ever since the Sears, Roebuck & Co. catalog came off the printing presses (1893), local companies finally have an advantage over national and international companies: We can create the same strong message, and we can do it—almost for free—with a virtual (and real community) of local Jackson shoppers.

This will not be a single solution to marketing success for anyone, but it's a good start, especially for any business that does not actively communicate with customers on social media sites. We will encourage Jacksonians to visit RelyLocal by promoting it with billboards, TV, radio, print ads and emblems in our store windows. We will encourage residents to follow us on Facebook, Twitter and automatically receive our specials and coupons on their smart phones. The overriding message of the site is: Buy Local First. It's not a brand new concept, but it is gaining traction in other parts of the country, and I think there's an excellent chance it can succeed here.

Please consider joining other Jackson business owners and me in communicating a simple idea: that until we get a couple of new auto plants here, or an international company suddenly decides to make Jackson its new world headquarters, we've only got each other to bring strength to our community. But it's enough to get started. We can do it if we just encourage all consumers to think local before sending their dollars out of town. Please call me at 517-529-9112 or respond to this email and I'll make sure you're kept apprised of the next step. If you're already a little enthusiastic about the idea, I would appreciate it if you will also forward my email to five or six of your friends.

Yours truly,

Andrew Kokas
Hill House Productions
Clarklake, MI

PS. The new site, <http://www.relylocal.com/jackson> goes live today. I've posted a few preliminary and sample web pages to get the site off the ground. There's still much to do with the site (and with this campaign), but the work begins today. Please help me if you can.

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