

WINNER - NEW BUSINESS OF THE YEAR



Will small town pride trump Amazon convenience?

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With the peak of a second COVID-19 wave coinciding with the holiday gift-giving season, saying the small business owner faces some challenges is something of an understatement.

Many businesses count on the November-December rush to carry them into the black, but this promises to be a season like no other. Throw in the seemingly endless market penetration of the online shopping behemoth Amazon, and it becomes clear your favourite local business operators need your support more than ever.

As recently as 2017, businesses with fewer than 10 employees accounted for a whopping 76 per cent of Canada's

economy, according to Statistics Canada.

Approximately two-fifths of businesses with 5 to 19 employees report their sales dropped 40 per cent or more since COVID arrived, according to StatsCan.

Meanwhile, Amazon reported an overall sales *increase* of 40 per cent, and saw its profits double year-over-year to \$5.2 billion for three months in April, May and June. Analysts expect Amazon to exceed \$100 billion in revenue for the first time ever in the 2020 fourth quarter.

Despite a bleak outlook, there are bright spots in the local economic landscape. While some businesses were putting up the shutters, Brandy Smalley-Watson took the

GO TO
TOP

bold stop of opening a new, bigger store in Fenelon Falls, just as tighter COVID-19 restrictions were again being re-applied. **The Barn and Bunkie**, a home decor store featuring a strong presence of local artisans, doesn't sound like a bullet-proof business that could withstand a pandemic unscathed, but Smalley-Watson believes, "external circumstances that make it difficult to operate will always be there. They will change, but they will always be there, so you try, and keep adapting until something works."

In her case, turning to social media worked. Outgoing and personable, Smalley-Watson herself is the greatest strength of the shop. When the doors were regulated shut, she did what a Winners or HomeSense couldn't do and launched weekly Facebook Live sessions where customers could see what was new. Her version of The Shopping Channel took off because she found a way to market the same personal touch she demonstrates in-store (such as remembering what a customer bought previously, or asking how a custom-mixed paint colour turned out) and it translated perfectly in a live, online format. She was delivering dozens of items the next day, many from stock she had ordered to participate in various cancelled home shows.

The business owner points out these were not e-commerce sales through her website; they were generated directly from the live interactions. People can buy items from Wayfair or Amazon that are remarkably similar to what she has on offer, but she found that when community members saw her making an effort, they were more than ready to support their local shop.

This sentiment was echoed by Amanda Pascoe at **Cake by the Lake** in Bobcaygeon. Barely eight months into her start-up business when the COVID restrictions began — and still a little surprised at the demand for decadent desserts — Pascoe started selling cheesecakes to wholesalers. She also started selling to businesses like

Lindsay's Farmers Butcher Shop, through online orders, and to walk-ins on the three days a week she opens to the public.

She, too, recognizes the power of Instagram and Facebook. When she posted something about a new flavor, or a fresh batch leaving the ovens, orders increased. Keeping the shop in the public eye even when people weren't getting out was a huge part of her success during the pandemic.

Pascoe surmises, "People were doing their own cooking, but still wanted a nice dessert that they may not have had time or energy to make after preparing a meal."

She also saw the need for gluten-free, and keto diet-friendly offerings, and added those to the menu. And, after she announced a delivery service, the local community responded overwhelmingly. She now routinely sells out of product.

Ann Scarlett at **The Kent Florist** in Lindsay also managed to stay connected to her customers during the first wave, thanks again, in part, to the power of social media. An early example related to "a couple thousand dollars' worth of flowers" that were going to die unsold as a result of COVID-19 restrictions.

She made an online announcement that they would be left out front of the store, free for the taking, and an hour later, they were all gone. "Individuals were taking turns walking up and choosing flowers to make their bouquet. It wasn't a free-for-all, and people planned to give them to neighbours and friends," Scarlett related.

Another creative adaptation involved putting product with prices in her massive store windows. People phoned from outside, pointed at what they wanted, paid for it through e-transfer, and picked it up around back. E-transfers had not been commonly used at the shop previously, but this was another example of the business operator responding to the needs of the customer — and being rewarded for it

Scarlett says her customers buy flowers to send to people they cannot visit the way they normally would, and purchase plants to brighten the newly minted home offices where they were suddenly spending their days.

If these three businesses are representative at all of small operations in Kawartha Lakes, owners are making an effort to win local customers' loyalty and business.

Local shops offer some undeniable advantages. Customers can touch and examine products up close, which also allows them to easily assess quality. Colour and texture are evident, and clothes are sure to fit.

Businesses in Kawartha Lakes ranging from electronics shops to sellers of musical

instruments are price-matching the big box stores, and if a return is necessary, it's easier to do that locally than to take another trip out of town or to the post office.

What local retailers are proving during hard times is that this holiday season, if given the chance, they will go to great lengths to prove that shopping local is the smart move.

It's also the move that will ensure they will be there for your convenience in good times, too.

What's one of your favourite local businesses – and why? Let us know by emailing kawarthalakespublisher@gmail.com.

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Downtown Lindsay will see better snow removal this year. Photo: Erin Burrell.

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The Lindsay CPR bridge abutment. Photo: Ian McKechnie.

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GO TO TOP