

BUSINESS

Battling big box stores

Top-notch customer service key to competing with large chains

BY JEFF MITCHELL
Staff Writer

When the heavy-hitters came to town, they gave Bill Lazenby six months before they'd put him out of business.

That was a couple of years ago. Mr. Lazenby's Allencourt Pharmacy, however, is still surviving and thriving at the same Major Mackenzie Drive location since it opened on Sept. 5, 1959.

Earlier this week, the old-fashioned bell hanging over the door at Allencourt Pharmacy rang steadily as morning customers came and went.

Mr. Lazenby chatted with customers he has tended to for decades.

'...people also want the personal touch, more than the big box thing with all its plastic and chrome. We just try to compete the best we can.'

Mr. Lazenby's 2,400-square-foot pharmacy and store continues to do a brisk business, maintaining a loyal customer base and attracting new clients, even as the shadow thrown by big box competitors such as Shoppers Drug Mart and Wal-Mart grows longer in Richmond Hill and throughout York Region.

Mr. Lazenby, 70, a former mayor of Richmond Hill, acknowledges the attraction new, large stores present to shoppers. But he feels his business offers customers something special, too.

"(Shoppers) all check out the new places," Mr. Lazenby said. "Sure, there's a lot of things they have to offer.

"But people also want the personal touch, more than the big box thing with all its plastic and chrome. We just try to compete the best we can. But we compete

on a service basis."

Mr. Lazenby's pharmacy dates back to a time when all pharmacists in Richmond Hill knew and co-operated with one another, their ultimate goal being to dispense medication prescribed by doctors.

If a pharmacy were out of a drug, the pharmacist could depend on one of his competitors to fill the prescription; if money were tight, a client could have a prescription filled on credit.

"Back in the days when people didn't have a lot of money, we would never refuse a prescription," Mr. Lazenby said. "I wouldn't say my bad debts have been that bad over the years."

Clients have responded over the years with loyalty, Mr. Lazenby said.

"People want that rapport and trust," he said.

In the age of the big box, merchants must give shoppers a reason to forego convenience, says John Kiru, executive director of Newmarket's downtown development committee. He is directing an exercise that will, over a period of years, see Newmarket's aging downtown core refurbished and given new life.

The process, so far, has involved an audit of Main Street's assets — such as its proximity to Fairy Lake and a host of special events that can attract crowds and liabilities, such as its crumbling sidewalks, lack of parking and deteriorating and vacant storefronts.

It is Mr. Kiru's hope a collaborative approach to Main Street's revitalization, combined with capital improvements slated by the town over the next few years, will turn Newmarket's downtown into a people place with a variety of shops and attractions.

Future town investment could include grants and interest-free loans for improvements to individual Main Street properties and deferred tax increases on build-

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STAFF PHOTO/STEVE SOMERVILLE

While it stands in the shadow of big box stores, Bill Lazenby's Richmond Hill pharmacy, opened in 1959, continues to thrive. He says offering top service to customers is key.

Internet no match for showrooms

BY ROY GREEN
Staff Writer

If the Internet were going to take over the car market, why are there so many new auto dealerships in York Region?

It was only a few years ago that dot-com experts were predicting consumers would forsake auto showrooms for the ease and comfort of ordering their vehicles from home.

"There were people who believed the Internet would be a serious threat to auto dealers," said Lee Wittick, general manager of Thornhill Saturn Saab Isuzu. "Not many dealers believed it, but a lot of Internet guys went for it. They thought they were going to take over the world."

And while he believes the Internet has become a valuable tool, it will never replace the sensory ritual of buying a shiny new car.

"People do their research on the Internet. They come in here and know as much about the cars and our financing and lease programs as we do. But they still want to walk in that front door and feel it, smell it, drive it."

In 2002, there's been a record amount of feeling, smelling and driving on auto lots across Canada.

Vehicle sales here have been growing at a record pace and, according to a forecast from Bank of Nova Scotia's economics division, will hit a record 1.65 million cars and trucks sold this year.

"The industry is doing very well," said Richard Gauthier, president of the Canadian Automobile Dealers Association. "Everyone knows the auto industry has always been the engine of our economy. I've been in this business for 33 years and I can't remember a longer sustained run of profitability."

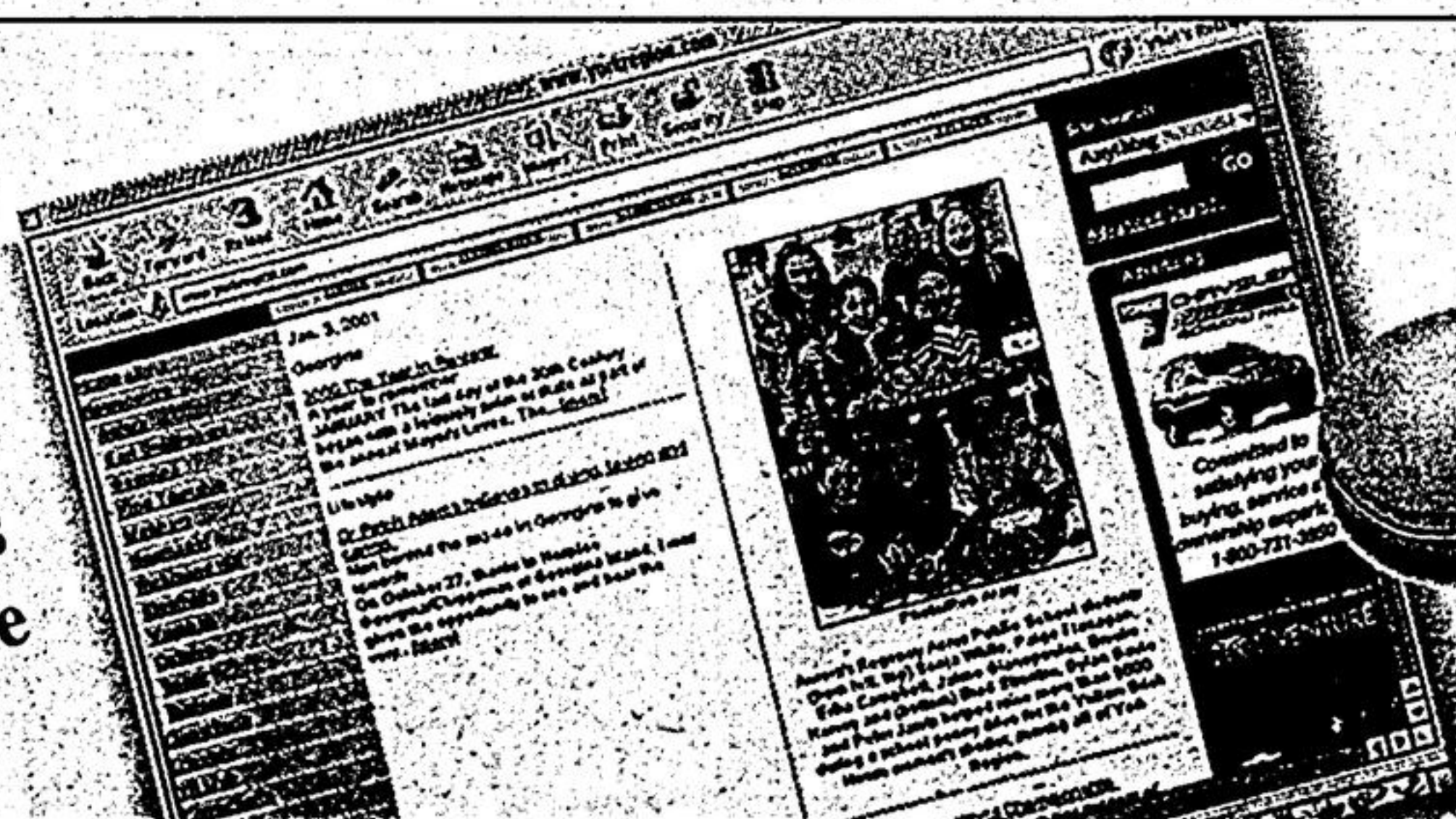
Mr. Gauthier agrees with the Scotiabank forecast, which credits the surge, in part, to interest-free financing and other incentives.

"The manufacturers are fighting a fierce battle for market share, that's what the industry is about now. The big three (GM, Ford and DaimlerChrysler) are

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