

Thinking Local

A Seattle Good Business network program aims to build vibrant community

by Ann Dorn

Christine Hanna, a former marketing professional with an MBA from the University of Washington, is a woman of boundless energy, determined vision and a penchant for a good latte—from a local, independent coffee house, that is. As the director of the Seattle Good Business Network, Hanna has devoted countless hours over the past year to launch Think Local, a campaign encouraging consumers to spend their dollars with local, independent retailers and service providers.



Christine Hanna, right, speaks to Think Local members at recent meeting. Photo/Mira Poling

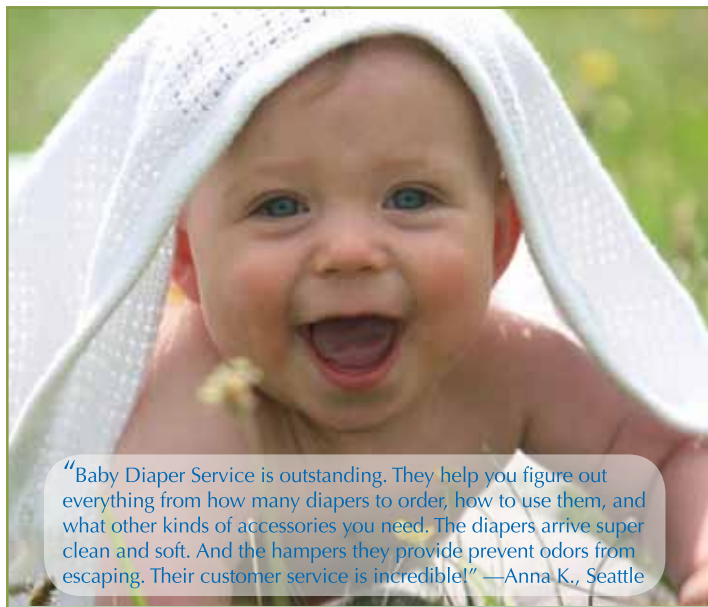
“Think Local gets people to think about how they spend their money and to focus on local businesses, which is so critical to a thriving economy,” Hanna explains. Seattle Good Business Network is a member of the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE) network, an organization with affiliates in more than 80 cities nationwide, many which operate “local first” campaigns like Think Local. Hanna says the program and the buy-local movement provide answers to the effects of the economic troubles plaguing individuals and businesses throughout Seattle and

the rest of the world.

Effects of dollars leaving the community

“As buyers, we have not really understood the impact of shifting more and more of our dollars toward businesses that are not locally based,” says Hanna, former managing director for the Sightline Institute, a regional sustainability think tank. “As a society, we are the proverbial frog in the pot of water that starts out comfortable and gets hotter and hotter. By the time we realize what’s going on, we’re in big trouble.”

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Historically, purchasing products and services sourced far away has been prohibitively expensive. In recent decades—even with added financial and environmental costs for packaging and shipping and managing operations over a widespread area—remotely sourced goods and services remain low priced (due to tax incentives and low wages and overhead for foreign production, for example), giving local companies stiff competition. The problem, local-first proponents claim, is that this leads to a loss of local character and, with more dollars leaving the area, decreased local economic stability.

“Our economic and political systems are joined at the hip. We have this idea that we have a democracy, but when you look at the structure of these systems, they are designed so that they concentrate wealth, power and access to resources to a smaller and smaller group of people,” Hanna explains. “Meanwhile unemployment is at an all-time high and our local economies are shriveling up. In some places they have withered away completely,” she says.

Studies over the past decade by firms including Rodino Associates, Angelou Economics, and the Bay Area Economic Forum have consistently found that the dollars spent at national chains, or “big box stores,” are increasingly leaving the community. While some economic theorists argue this wealth eventually trickles down through large corporations headquartered locally, Hanna sees a dark side in the form of the concessions that are sometimes made to attract these companies.



John Hamlin and Derek VanDyke of Green Benefits at Think Local gathering. Photo/Mira Poling

“Lots of wooing and cajoling happens to try to get large businesses to locate in various cities, because it creates jobs. However, the people in that place have no control over whether that business decides to stay, because 20 other cities are willing to bid lower by relaxing their regulations or taxes—it’s a losing proposition,” Hanna concludes.

The strength of local first movement

Hanna is not afraid to acknowledge the challenges existing within the local first movement. She notes that some goods and products cannot be produced locally or may be prohibitively expensive; and that in some sectors, such as the aerospace industry,

only a few companies are qualified to meet global demand. However, Hanna sees “opportunities galore” for entrepreneurs to tailor products to local tastes and strip market share from mega corporations.

“We have a thriving coffee culture—lots of independents, and they are very successful,” Hanna points out. “Compare that to the soda industry. It doesn’t take a lot to make a good soda in terms of capital. There isn’t any reason there couldn’t be a similar kind of renaissance around soda. We have Dry Soda, which is tapping into those possibilities

Studies show dollars spent locally have an impact of up to four times their value

by providing something less sweet and more grown-up, and we could have more like them."

Buying local is also a way of empowering business owners that live locally and are invested in the community, resulting in more contributions to local schools, nonprofits and other community projects, Hanna affirms. "Studies of local economies in various cities find that dollars left in the hands of business owners multiply [within the community] many times over those that leave, with one dollar having an impact up to four times its value," she says.

Can we make the shift?

Existing buy-local campaigns in other regions show promising results. A 2006 study of Local First, a BALLE program in Bellingham, Washington, found that 58 percent of those surveyed reported being more deliberate about choosing local independent businesses than they were three years prior. Another positive result was that 67 percent of businesses reported that, as a result of program participation, they adopted practices to help them operate more sustainably and strengthen their community.

"Local businesses do so much more than just sell products and services - they are critical nodes in the network of a strong local economy and community. Our goal is to give them as much support as possible in that role," Hanna says. Think Local member businesses receive a profile on ThinkLocal-Seattle.org, photos in the Stranger and Seattle Magazine, postcards, window decals and educational materials for

their customers, events and networking meetings, as well as discounts for advertising with Seattle Natural Awakenings magazine and local radio stations. Hanna says Think Local is also strongly considering offering a long-term loyalty card program, similar to the well-received Supportland, in Portland, Oregon.

Occupy Mainstreet: democratizing the economy

According to Hanna, growing awareness of buying local is an integral part of the solution to the resentments and anger that fuel the Occupy Wall Street movement, which has spread to cities around the world including Seattle, reflecting discontent with the inequity of the current system of corporatization. "Go team!" she says of the movement, "It's a great and necessary thing. that more and more people are waking up to just how broken our current system is. Democratizing ownership of our economy and our political rights is the only way everyone can have equal access to wealth, power and resources. The first step toward that is to stop supporting a system that is counter to our self-interest, and to bring that ownership home." Ready to start? "If you want to join the Occupy movement, move your money to a local bank or credit union, shop with local independent businesses, and most importantly, spread the word."

Ann Dorn is a writer and the publisher of Natural Awakenings magazine, Seattle. Christine Hanna is the director of Think Local. Contact her at 206-629-2346, Info@SeattleNetwork.org or ThinkLocalSeattle.org.

Action Alert: Bank Transfer Day

Over 55,000 Facebook users (as of press time) have committed to switching from large banks to credit unions on Nov. 5 as part of a movement called Bank Transfer Day. Organizers of the event are encouraging the public to make the switch due to soon-to-be imposed transaction fees on debit card use that stand to earn major banks billions of dollars, according to critics. Credit unions, in contrast, are member-owned and not-for-profit. Some participants also acknowledge locally-owned community banks are an additional alternative. For more information: Facebook.com/Nov.5

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