

by News-Register staff

Main Street Aurora, or Main Street Anywhere, would not be the same without retailers. No longer could you run to town for a gift when you realize you forgot your anniversary. No longer could you make a quick trip to buy ingredients for school treats your child remembered to tell you about the night before they were needed.

You'd be heading out in your vehicle, using \$4 gasoline, to drive 20 miles for socks, a last-minute birthday gift, Mother's Day flowers, a watch for Father's Day, a string of Christmas lights to replace ones that fail to light after a year in storage or one final 2x4 stud when you find yourself short in a remodeling project.

You'd be wondering why your son or daughter has nowhere to work after school or during summer vacation.

You'd be footing the entire bill for post-prom celebrations and band trips. And, most assuredly, you'd be paying higher taxes.

Local businesses donate to schools and local fundraisers.

They employ the children of local families.

They pay local taxes.

And they're able to do so only if they stay in business.

That's why they look for niches to fill.

That's why they focus so much attention on customer service.

That's why they focus on quality.

That's why they band together to promote retail events -- hoping to get area residents to shop locally and entice those who live further way to take part in the shopping experience in Aurora.

Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn't.

Several local business owners shared some candid thoughts in response to the News-Register's report on retail leakage.

Aurora Floral

Debby Jones at Aurora Floral said she perceives that the younger generation doesn't have the same loyalty to their hometown as she experienced in her youth. She thinks back on trips out of town as a special occasion, whereas today's fast-moving society doesn't hesitate to hop in the car to go shopping, for entertainment or just to get away.

"My concern is keeping Aurora, and keeping the stores we have," she said. "We are like an ecosystem, and if we lose the small little store, that can start a chain reaction. Do we lose our school system eventually, like so many little towns have? Do we lose the reason people come to Aurora? It won't look inviting anymore if the stores are all empty."

Jones said she understands how people who commute to or from nearby towns might find it easy to shop where there is more variety, but she wonders if they ever stop to think about the bigger picture.

"Even though they are only one person going out and not supporting the community, if we all felt that way what would happen to small-town USA?" she said. "That's my biggest concern."

As for the flower business, Jones said she knows Aurora Floral is competitive on pricing.

"I deal with other floral shops in places like Lincoln and Omaha, so I know I'm competitive with them if not better on pricing," she noted. "I can't compete against that loose rose you're going to pick up at Wal-mart, but I want the consumer to know that my loose rose is a better quality and a better grade. I'm not sure the everyday consumer realizes the difference, but as far as fresh flowers professionally arranged, you're going to get more for your value here."

The family-owned store prides itself on customer service, as do most rural retailers.

"I can gift wrap that item for free, deliver it at a reasonable price, and if there is a problem, we'll take care of it," she said. "I may not be able to match variety with stores that mass produce with bigger resources, but I can offer them quality service."

In addition, Aurora Floral supports local promotions, passing on savings to customers through FPS cards, the Aurora Lions Club and the annual "Shop Aurora" holiday flier. If more area residents would start looking at the local level, Jones firmly believes they might be surprised with what they find.

"I wish the citizens of small-town USA would at least come in and check out what their retailers have," she said. "If they don't have an item you want they may be able to find it for you, and if they can't, then go to outside resources, but at least give your local merchants that opportunity to try."

Super Foods

Mike and Pat Gibilisco have made numerous changes in their downtown Aurora grocery store during the last two years. They have expanded the produce section and changed suppliers, for example, all with the intent of giving their customers more variety and lower prices.

Nonetheless, Mike said he realizes some people prefer the bigger stores.

"Grand Island may have more variety than my store does, in some cases, and there is more glamour in shopping in those big stores, but we have made some changes and we're going to be making more changes throughout the year," Gibilisco said. "We cannot carry quite as much variety, but when people have requests we try to fill those if we can.

"People have freedom to shop where they want," he added, "but I do want them to know that my family, staff and I would appreciate their business a lot more than the multi-million dollar owners of the grocery stores in Grand Island."

And for the price-conscious consumer, Gibilisco said it's harder to compare apples to apples than it may appear.

"Pricing in the grocery business can be deceiving," he said. "The discount stores will have an item that may have a different package or size, so it's really hard to compare price to our's because they aren't comparable by size or package."

Even as a grocer who does price checks in bigger stores from time to time, Gibilisco said it is difficult to determine what is cheaper and what is more expensive between Super Foods and area discount stores. In the end, there is often a perception involved, which may or may not be accurate.

"It really boils down to the paid total at the end that counts," he added. "I feel that if they shopped our weekly ad, took advantage of our bonus buys, temporary price reductions and our Rewards program, they would find that they are not saving that much money, if any at all, by shopping in Grand Island."

Honeysuckle Lane

Honeysuckle Lane's Bonnie Bamesberger is in a good spot when it comes to at least one niche market that keeps people shopping at home.

Aurora residents don't often order flowers from out of town when there's a funeral in Aurora, a wedding, prom, Mother's Day or other special occasion. And it helps that Honeysuckle Lane offers delivery for any size order for funerals and weddings.

"Most of our customers are local, or ordering for local people, when it comes to flowers," Bamesberger said. "But there also are a lot of people who don't even know we have flowers."

She tries to counter that by aggressive direct advertising, window displays and Facebook posts, noting that one of the most effective ways to get her (and other Aurora retailers') message across is by banding together for joint retail events.

"When we do things city-wide, as a joint retail group, we get a lot more people coming to town," she said. "We brainstorm promotions and people do come to town when we do, but you can't have a big sale every week so that's not the solution."

Joint efforts do pay off and the feedback has been positive. Bamesberger said people from out of town who make the trip to Aurora to shop those promotions are so positive about their experience and the atmosphere -- the brick streets and other things that make Aurora unique.

Beyond that, Bamesberger said she tries hard to entice local residents to shop in Aurora and others outside the community to head her way by stocking her store with a different variety of merchandise from others in the area.

"I try hard to carry different items they can't find other places, but we tend to cross over," she said. "When market was in Kansas City, we all shopped there and seemed to have the same items. Now we try to keep our own niches, but overlap does happen."

While merchandise and retail promotions lay the groundwork for drawing customers, Bamesberger said she and other Aurora retailers offer something that the big box stores do not -- service, service, service.

"If someone is not happy, we make it right," she said. "We do complimentary gift wrapping. If someone wants a special silk arrangement for Mother's Day we try hard to do the colors they want in the price range they want."

Bamesberger knows she's not going to get every Aurora resident to think Aurora first when it comes to shopping, but does her best to serve those who do.

"And it's not just about trying to get people to shop in my store. We (Aurora retailers) help each other out -- if we don't have something we send our customers to another Aurora store. We'll even call ahead to make sure they have what someone is looking for," she said.

Bamesberger said shopping local just makes sense. It helps the local economy immensely because every dollar spent in Aurora gets turned around multiple times.

"How do we get it across to people that if they don't shop locally, sooner or later there won't be any stores here," she said.

Susan Books & Gifts

When Susan Williams opened the doors of Susan's Books and Gifts several years ago, she knew she wasn't going to survive on big ticket purchases when her shop was filled with hundreds of small items.

"My goal is to survive on the average purchase of \$10 to \$15 and a lot of people coming in the door. At that amount, we're not influenced by the bad economy so much," she said. "The loyalty of my customers makes that easy."

But it's not just about the price of merchandise she carries, it's more about the kid-friendly atmosphere, the conversation, smiling, staying positive and getting to know your customers.

"This is a place where people can bring their kids to play and feel comfortable while they shop," Williams said. "All of our toys are open, so kids can always play."

Williams calls her store an "escape from reality," noting it's a gift shop, a new and used book store and an incredible kids' store.

"We offer the entire experience. We have gifts for every age. Books that change your life. You can come in and forget about reality and walk out feeling encouraged," she said. "It's a crazy place, yet it's a peaceful place."

Williams offers a huge selection of merchandise and doesn't believe a huge portion of local residents even realize it. Because of that, she utilizes a mass e-mail system that sends her notes out every Thursday, letting people know what she's reading and what's new in the store.

"The Thursday newsletter is the highest priority for me. It reaches a large number of people (2,300 in seven countries) on a personal level," she explained. "The town lets the store survive, so I can spend more time behind the scenes, doing outreach."

The benefits are twofold -- it motivates Williams to keep reading, even when she doesn't think she has time, and it enables her to get the word out quickly to anyone, anywhere.

And there's nothing more worthwhile and satisfying than reading a good book -- that's something Williams believes, heart and soul.

That's why she opened a used book area in her store and it's why she raises money to give books away to school children and donate books to the hospital. So far, she given away 1,500 books and that is due to the generosity of other Aurora businesses and individuals.

"So many Aurora businesses have donated money and people donate used books. We've had over 10,000 used books donated and they keep coming in," she said. "That makes it possible to give things away. It's humbling that people trust me with their books and money."

While service is paramount at Susan's Books and Gifts, so too is keeping an inventory fresh.

Williams special orders merchandize twice weekly, something that has led to a wide selection of items the past two years.

Because Williams is so busy doing outreach, she said it's been critical for her to hire the right people.

"I hire people who understand that everyone has a story and a different mood. I'm very selective who works here," she said.

Reading people and anticipating what they really need when they arrive in her store is important, she added.

She often gauges what people need beyond the gift they're looking for, noting she loves to hand them a book she feels is just right for them.

"If a book is handed to them, it's more meaningful than if they bought it. I like a book to be a gift," she said.

Williams' enthusiasm and zest for life is contagious and that, she said, is what people are looking for in an Aurora shopping experience.

"We try to make the store a treasure. People can't find a store like this anywhere else in Nebraska," she said.

Most of Susan's Books and Gifts business comes from within a 50-mile radius of Aurora, but even then she realizes she's not going to get everyone to walk through her door and she's not about to make people feel guilty if they choose to shop somewhere else.

"It's important to shop locally. We have incredible stores in Aurora and shopping locally means we stay in business. We can't stay open otherwise and the town will look depressing. People don't want to see empty buildings -- it's depressing," she said.

But, she added, Aurora retailers also need to understand it's fun to go out of town when people get a day off.

"If people will just stay here to buy their quick gifts and basics, that will keep our stores open," she said. "We don't need to make people to feel guilty about going out of town once in awhile. And we need to promote out-of-towners shopping here."

Jim's U-Save Pharmacy

Jim McHargue, owner of Jim's U-Save Pharmacy in Aurora, said providing excellent service and serving a specific market has helped grow his business.

"I think you definitely, in a smaller town, have to be a niche marketer when finding categories larger stores don't delve into. For pharmacies, that might be diabetic care, brace fitting, something that they're not going to have the time to sit down there and do a thorough job with, like diabetic shoes," he said. "Our one-to-one, face-to-face interaction is something that a larger store can't obviously do."

He said the store also can special order items with less than a 24-hour turnaround.

"If we put in an order by 5 p.m., we'll have that product for that person by 10:30 the next morning," McHargue noted. "We try to save them that trip and then, for the money, for a lot of people that's a good deal. We basically out-service (the bigger stores)."

The pharmacy also offers digital photo processing and a line of gift items. "Each store has its own personality and a gift line, anything we can get that's maybe a unique product," he noted.

Service and accessibility are two sources of pride McHargue has for his store.

"We're far more accessible and there's no waiting for service here. People will go a distance and be content to have service given to them whenever the person in that area is available, but they have to wait," he stated. "We try and give service on a quicker basis. We respect (our customers') time and try and give them service that's one, more attentive and two, speedier. Often times, when they go to larger stores, they have sales but their intent is to keep you in there. It's to their advantage to not serve you quickly."

Reports of consumers and their shopping habits have spurred retailers to think about that perception of savings and tell the public how local merchants compare favorably to others.

"We as merchants need to do more work in explaining how we do compete favorably against towns to try and educate people that perceptions are not always what (they seem)," McHargue said. "Often times, in retrospect, the service and convenience might outweigh the perception of savings."

He added that customers need to be informed and do the math before assuming that the best price is out of town. And if a better price is found, other negative factors can tilt the balance toward the local merchant.

"Obviously, people want to buy it at the best price and that's understood, but they should do their homework and a lot of times, the local merchant might go the extra mile for something creative to offset anything (such as a lower price out of town)," he said. "If there is perception of savings, that often times is wiped out by a lack of service if you have a problem with the item. It's also wiped out in the time you spend and additional purchases you make that are not intended when you go in there."

“I would just say that for some people it’s more glamorous to go to the big lights and things and I guess I’d say the local merchants are willing to go the extra mile to make sure you’re satisfied. If you’re worried about selection, they’re always open to bringing other items in to meet your needs.”

Schneiders Hardware

A wide variety of items and excellent service are two big factors Jeff Schneider touts about Schneiders Hardware, Home and Garden.

And, perhaps most importantly, that selection and service comes with a personal touch.

“I’d say we know 99 percent of our customers by their name,” Schneider said. “We’re willing to take our time and problem solve for our customers. It’s an atmosphere where we try to help every customer who walks in the door, but I know that’s not always possible.”

The store has started television advertising in addition to local media and circulations, and he said that has provided new visibility. But those are just some of the many ways he tries to draw customers.

“We do weekend events. We (had) a Relay for Life benefit in the parking lot this (last) weekend,” he added. “We do a lot of local in-store promotions and weekly specials.”

Schneiders also offers service to about 90 percent of the products available in the store, and also sells Dish Network service, Weber grills and patio furniture.

“If we sell a lawn mower here, you can buy parts and get your lawn mower worked on here locally. If we sell you an appliance, we have a local appliance guy that will work on appliances we sell. We do window and screen repair. We do some vacuum repairs. We do in-home set-ups. We do free delivery,” he said.

“The other day a lady’s cordless phone went out. When the storms went through here, her phones weren’t working, so I went out to her house and figured out it wasn’t a phone problem, it was a phone line issue. But that’s something that the big box stores won’t do. You’d never get someone from (there) to drive out to your house to look at your cordless phone. We have a lot more customer interaction, a lot more 1-on-1, a lot more personalized service.

“You’d never go into (a big box store) expecting someone to help you. They are self service all the way. If you can find someone to help you, they may or may not know what’s going on. If they come into our store, they expect someone knowledgeable if they have a plumbing problem. They expect somebody knowledgeable if they need a lawn mower fixed. They expect somebody knowledgeable if they need help in the Radio Shack department. In my opinion, the customer demands more out of us than out of a box store.”

In fact, he notes they have better selection of some items than bigger stores.

“We sell a full line of major appliances. We sell Dish Network. We specialize in Weber grills. We probably have more Weber grills in stock than any of the big box stores in Grand Island. We have a pretty good assortment of patio furniture,” Schneider said. “We sell everything we can.”

Schneider said local retailers are trying to spread a message to consumers.

“We’ve got what you want. We’ve got a drug store. We’ve got two grocery stores. We’ve got two automobile dealerships. We’ve got 90 percent of the stuff you need every day,” he explained. “We’re not always going to be the cheapest, but we’re convenient, we know you, we’re friendly, we’re knowledgeable, we’re competitive. I don’t think anybody in Aurora is purposely trying to overprice their merchandise.

“We need to do a better job educating our consumers that hey, we’ve got it. If you need it, we’ve got it locally. Before you drive out of town to buy something, try Aurora first. There’s four hardware stores in town. I’m sure one of those will have what you need.”

He also explained that stores can be handcuffed in setting prices on some items.

“Prices for a lot of big ticket items are set by the manufacturer. Weber grills are the same price here as they are everywhere else in state of Nebraska. That’s how they sell them,” Schneider stated.

Today’s society consists of people wanting to satisfy needs immediately, and Schneider said he recognizes that stores need to be able to fill that void.

“Consumers expect goods and services immediately. If someone’s looking for a 2x4 board, they want to buy that 2x4 immediately. They don’t want to wait three days, they don’t want to wait a week. If a consumer wants a refrigerator, they need the refrigerator today, unless they’re doing a remodeling job,” Schneider stated. “If you don’t have what they want, they’re going to go somewhere else and get it. ... The biggest thing a retailer can do is try to have a wide variety of goods available. You’re not

going to satisfy everyone or get everyone into the door, but you have to have a large enough selection that if you do get them into the door, you'll at least have something in that category to offer them."

Schneider explained that the personal touch of dealing with a local retailer isn't just inside the four walls of the store.

"You would never see the manager for the big box store. You wouldn't even know who the manager of the big box store is. How often can you walk up to the manager of the big box store and know who you're talking to? How often does the big box store manager come out of his office and help you with a plumbing situation? How often does the manager of a big box store deliver your appliance?" he asked. "The local retailer has a lot more personal touch than any of the big box stores. The local retailer is more civically minded as far as belonging to service organizations, as far as belonging to the fire department, as far as being active in his church, active in the school the community."