

Program seeks to boost OKC businesses

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Hanna Hardin picks out shoes, taking advantage of the tax-free weekend at Blue Seven on Friday. (Maiké Sabolich)

OKLAHOMA CITY – One entrepreneurial leap of faith deserves another.

A loosely formed group of independent retail aficionados has launched Keep It Local OK, a program to boost awareness and sales for small businesses.

Locally owned restaurants and retail businesses may have plenty of determination and business acumen, but they also have a miniscule budget to get the word out about their existence. Bryce Bandy and friends are stepping into that role.

“We wanted to find a way to invest in Oklahoma and the whole resurgence going on in Oklahoma City,” said Bandy, who started Keep It Local OK with his business

partner, Chris Branson.

Keep It Local OK has a yearly membership rate of \$500. In return, members get their own profile page on www.KeepItLocalOK.com.

For \$10, shoppers buy the cards, which offer discounts at all members' shops, such as 10-percent-off merchandise or a free appetizer.

“In talking to people, we found that many of them want to shop local, but they don't know where to shop,” Bandy said. “And Oklahoma City is spread out, so if you don't know where to find the shops, you can do a lot of driving. So we thought the cards would be a good way to give consumers the tools and incentives to shop local.”

Bandy said his effort began in Oklahoma City earlier this year and is just now gaining momentum. He got the ball rolling through the local businesses he knew through his freelance graphic design and photography work. He plans to take it statewide and has meetings soon with Tulsa businesses. So far, he has 55 business members and sold 2,000 reward cards.

Shanna Paddock, manager of Blue Seven, a clothing and home decor shop on N. May Avenue, said Keep It Local OK has brought in new customers who were eating at locally owned restaurants, but wanted to seek out local retail. Keep It Local serves as a sort of advertising agency for the store, she said.

“They really stay on top of Twitter and Facebook – reposting links and re-tweeting things we send out,” Paddock said. “They help us promote everything.”

As a small business, branding is a never-ending process, Paddock said, along with letting people know the atmosphere and merchandise of Blue Seven. As a seven-year-old business, Blue Seven has grown, recently expanding its retail space. But the work is never done.

“People come in all the time and say, ‘I've driven by every day but never stopped in, and I thought I'd finally stop in,’” she said.

Bandy said he wants Keep It Local to provide that boost to small business owners, who may be strapped by time or lack of money to get their name out in ways that a big advertising budget can provide. However, the program isn't anti-franchise or anti-corporate store, Bandy said. They simply want to help local entrepreneurs succeed.

The Keep It Local OK efforts are dovetailing with a "shop local" initiative at the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber. Alison Oshel, director of community redevelopment for the chamber, said she's just started the initiative for the new fiscal year and plans to work with Bandy to strengthen the message.

Oshel's job also includes courting national retailers, but a "shop local" message isn't counterintuitive, she said. A strong independent retail community helps everyone.

"When you spend your money with an independent retailer, 68 cents of your dollar comes back to the local economy, and only 43 cents comes back when you spend it in a chain store," Oshel said. "It will boost our local economy when we keep our local independents alive."

And in some cases, a vibrant independent retail presence could attract national chains.

"I'm working with national retailers now that I'm trying to recruit that only want to locate in areas where there are local retailers because they understand that brings a certain flavor that national chains don't bring," she said.

Oshel said the chamber will be working on its "shop local" plan this fall. The topic will carry into next year at the chamber's annual retail luncheon in April. The speaker is Cinda Baxter, founder of The 3/50 Project, which aims to strengthen local brick-and-mortar businesses. Baxter encourages people to commit at least \$50 a month to independent businesses in their communities.

"We have some great independent retail in Oklahoma City, probably more than we acknowledge," Oshel said. "I hope part of our program push is for people to understand better where the retailers are located and the kinds of products and services they offer. We have some great retailers that haven't quite been discovered yet."

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