

Downtown merchants want holiday shoppers to ‘think small’ on Saturday



By Michael Bradwell

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Tom Storf, co-owner of Fantastic Impressions on South Main Street in Washington, holds a promotional “Shop Small” bag for Small Business Saturday. - Michael Bradwell/Observer-Reporter [Order a Print](#)

When you’re in the middle of Black Friday shopping today, merchants in Washington and Waynesburg hope you’ll also “think small” and save some of your energy and money for tomorrow.

That's when the two towns and several others around the area will reprise their "Small Business Saturday" holiday event.

The promotion, which debuted on a Thanksgiving weekend six years ago in Roslindale Village, Mass., is a part of the massive Thanksgiving weekend holiday shopping event, bookended by Black Friday (and more recently Thanksgiving Day sales events) and Cyber Monday, which feature big-box retail and e-commerce stores, respectively.

Small Business Saturday, by contrast, is promoted by American Express and encourages holiday shoppers to patronize brick and mortar stores that are small and local.

Pete Stefansky, Washington Business District manager, said downtown merchants were pleased with the outcome of last year's inaugural "Small Business Saturday" holiday shopping.

This year, the merchants are adding more participants to their ranks, and as of mid-week, had more than a dozen stores. And unlike last year, the event now invites those who may not be in the core business district, but are also downtown, Stefansky said.

Also this year, the merchants registered with the national Small Business Saturday website, so when anyone accessing the site types in the 15301 zip code, they'll see a complete list of participating merchants in the Washington area.

To Stefansky, one of the biggest indicators that merchants are excited about building upon last year's success is the increased level of participation he saw in advance of this year's promotion.

"This year, they were coming to us" to ask about the event, he said.

Barb Kirby, vice president of Waynesburg Prosperous & Beautiful, which works with the Waynesburg Merchants Guild and other downtown businesses, said her organization distributed information and "swag" from American Express to help promote the event. She hopes the businesses will take advantage of the nationwide promotion.

"We're trying to promote the event and encourage people to shop small, and for the small businesses to take advantage of all the publicity they're putting out," Kirby said of the support from American Express. "It's just another way for our downtown merchants to increase exposure with what they have to offer."

Kristy Vliet, co-owner of 5 Kidz Kandy on High Street in Waynesburg, said her store has seen mixed results from the previous two Small Business Saturday events over the past two years. But she's hoping the formation two years ago of the Waynesburg Merchants

Guild – where she serves as president and includes more than a dozen local businesses – will help them promote each other during the holiday shopping season.

“We just started as a group of stores trying to figure out how to bring shoppers into downtown Waynesburg,” Vliet said. “I think trying to drive people into the downtown business district has always been an uphill battle.”

The deals most of the merchant guild shops will offer is \$5 off purchases of \$25 or more, and others will offer snacks and beverages. She thought there appeared to be some shopping fatigue last Small Business Saturday from people spending the day after Thanksgiving hitting big-box retailers. Vliet said her shop, which offers various sweets, did better on Cyber Monday.

“We’re hoping to let people know that we’re here and the stores are open,” Vliet said of the small business shopping date. “There seems to be a lack of knowledge that we’re still here, but everything we do builds on it, and it’s grown. We’re trying to breathe life back into this town.”

Double opportunity

Ed Belfoure, president of the recently opened Red Pump Spirits at 32 N. Main St., said his shop will be open Saturday, although it was not made aware of the city’s Small Business Saturday promotion. Belfoure said he’s also looking forward to the Dec. 2 Holiday Market, where he’ll have a booth in the South Main Street pavilions, as well as keeping his shop open.

“We’ll be open both places,” he said. Red Pump, which became the first distillery to open in Washington County since Prohibition, makes Rebellion Rye Whiskey, Blue Parrot Vodka, as well as three liqueurs.

Angela Burgess, who with her husband, John, owns A&M Wine & Beer Supplies and Washington Winery, said this year’s Small Business Saturday is building upon last year’s inaugural success.

Like Belfoure, her shop will also do double duty on Dec. 2, staying open during the holiday parade and with booth space at the Holiday Market.

Merchants said they benefit whenever they can be a part of various festivals held downtown.

Tom Storf, who co-owns Fanatic Impressions with his son Zachary at 166 S. Main St., was flying the Small Business Saturday banners in his shop early in the week. He said Zachary contacted American Express and received many free promotional materials to use in their business, which provides screen printing on sporting goods apparel, memorabilia and for college Greek life.

"It's all free, and many (merchants) don't think about it," said Storf.

"I think the Whiskey Rebellion Festival is good, and (if we can) get Small Business Saturday moving up that would be fine," he said.

Belfoure agreed that festivals are a boost to businesses like his, noting that he recently attended one in Overton Village in Westmoreland County.

"We do well at festivals," he said.

Storf said he kept the shop open during last year's holiday parade, but didn't see much business. But with this year's downtown Holiday Market, he thinks the outcome might be better.

"We'll play it by ear, and see how it goes. I'm hoping the parade helps. I think it will."

Christy Bean Rowing, executive director of the Washington Citywide Development Corp., said events like Small Business Saturday and the Holiday Market, which will be part of the annual downtown Christmas parade, should help to reinforce the idea among people that the city offers a place to shop, for the holidays and at other times of the year, as well.

"Everyone has a memory of downtown (when it was) a commercial hub," she said. "We need to breathe some more fire into the belly of downtown; we want to see the city be a viable endeavor for the small-business market."

Rowing hopes that with a commitment of nearly 50 vendors for the Holiday Market, one or two of them might see the city as a place where they could do business on a permanent basis.

"We've got reasonable rents, new sidewalks and a business district that already exists," she said. "Now, we're ready for the next step."

Regional editor Mike Jones contributed to this report.

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