

BUSINESS: Local stores have advantages over big-box stores, online shopping

FROM PAGE 1A

coronavirus, which brought shutdowns, masks on our faces and questions of shoppers.

Many local merchants are now finding ways to remain competitive with the online markets and seeking to attract customers who are shying away from larger retail stores. One of those stores is Meggie B's Gifts and More, a retail store in Semmes. Owner Robin Byrd said she has maintained her store hours and has a number of in-store specials planned for the holiday season.

"We are running regular business hours and have a lot of sales planned," said Byrd. "We have planned some door-buster specials that are set to bring people in, but we always adhere to social distancing rules too."

However, COVID-19 isn't the only hurdle for small business owners. The virus will one day end. Amazon won't.

"The way we fight Amazon is by offering services it cannot match," Byrd said. "We focus on personal customer service. We monogram items, personalize Christmas ornaments, provide giftwrapping, and other features that online companies cannot do." She adds, "When you come in my store you see me, the owner. That is not the case for online shopping."

No matter how much you spend at Amazon, the chances are slim for meeting Jeff Bezos, and that is a point that many locally owned stores make.

In Citronelle's Andrews Hardware, the Andrews family has operated the store for nearly a century. Brian Andrews, a fourth-generation member of the family-owned business, also points out that shoppers who come to his store can deal with him or other members of the family, but their employees are also focused on customer service.

"Here at Andrews we sell a wide variety of items, ranging from lumber and hardware to Christmas decorations, and we want to make sure that when a customer walks in our doors looking for an item we have that they are taken care of. If they have a question on what tool they need to do a job, we are here to answer that for them. You can't get that with some of the larger chain stores," Andrews said. "We are fortunate in the fact that our company has served the people of Mobile and Washington counties for decades. I am the fourth generation of Andrews to work here and in many cases our customers are also in their fourth and fifth generations of shopping with us. We appreciate the long-term relationships that we have with our customers."

Brad Williamson, owner of Quint's Sporting Goods in Saraland, said one of the major differences in his store as compared to online shopping is the desire to provide the products



Photos by Willie Gray, Charity Jackson and John O'Dell/Call News

Miles Robinson of Badcock Furniture, Marilyn Lott of Frogmore Boutique and Brad Williamson of Quint's Sporting Goods.

his customers are looking for.

"When things are hard to get, we go over and above to make sure our customers receive what they need. Online stores can't do that," Williamson said. "A lot of time, when someone is ordering online, they are ordering along with everybody else in the country. Here at Quint's we stock items for our area, items that are specific to South Alabama. We know our customers and do everything possible to have what they want."

Williamson also noted an issue with buying from big-box, brick-and-mortar stores is the quality of the merchandise. "If you buy from Walmart or over the internet and then you discover the product is defective, you have to send it back yourself. But when buying something from us, we help you with problems. We treat you like we want to be treated."

With 40 years of doing business in Chickasaw, Sheila Kirksey — co-owner of Rose Bud Flowers with her husband, Allen — agrees with the importance of personal service in competing with retail giants, both real world and cyber. Rose Bud's secret weapon? Water. "Flowers don't like not having water," Sheila explains. "Often, that is how you get them from a large chain store or by online shopping. The flowers are dry and packed in a box, dehydrated. They won't live as long."

She notes that Rose Bud's flowers are in a vase — with water — and arranged by professional local florists. Amazon can't ship flowers like that.

Like businesses all over the country, local businesses were forced to deal with something no one expected to see in 2020, a worldwide pandemic. And like businesses across America, many have found the aftermath of COVID-19 to be rough.

"We have a lot of loyal customers who remained with us during COVID," said Ashley Easley, manager of A Little Shoppe, in Satsuma. "Our sales are currently about at pre-COVID levels, which is great," she adds. "We appreciate our customers for staying with us and how they helped keep us going. People still like to get out and shop, not just go online."

A Little Shoppe has sales planned for Small Business Saturday with door prizes and other features — with coronavirus safety measures in place.

Addressing business in a COVID world, Marilyn Lott, owner of Saraland's Frogmore Boutique, adds, "We are doing fine. We are holding our own. I think if we continue with personal service Amazon can't match, we will continue doing fine."

She continues, "We help customers select their gifts and apparel, and help exchange merchandise or give a store credit. With us you are friends as well as customers. We know you, which isn't always the case in big-box or online stores."

Miles Robinson, manager of Badcock Home Furniture and More in Citronelle, said his store is pushing for Black Friday sales as well as Small Business Saturday. Robinson points out that while Badcock is a large company, the stores are locally owned and as a result the employees and owners are residents of the communities the stores serve.

"We are preparing for the holiday season

just as we have those in years past. We have a wide variety of items for people to select from and one of the things they can get at our store that they can't get on line is the opportunity to see and feel the items before they buy them," Robinson said. "We try to go over and above to take care of our customers and I think that is one of the reasons people continue to shop with us."

All noted appreciation of Small Business Saturday.

"It's a great program and a wonderful idea," noted Brad Williamson. "We participate and encourage shopping in small business. We believe in shopping local, not just here at Quint's but at other local stores as well."

Robin Byrd of Meggie B's added, "We are the people who support your schools, sponsor your children's activities. We hire local employees. We are glad our customers buy local and are supportive, especially during the peak COVID times when we closed for eight weeks. We are lucky to be here and back to normal."

Shelia Kirksey explained, "We as small businesses need the people's support. The pandemic and shutdowns made it hard to come back but we did not miss a day. We have been blessed to have a flower shop for 40 years."

All look forward to Small Business Saturday and the 2020 holiday shopping season.

We are here to do God's will.




COMPLETE FUNERAL PACKAGES

starting at **\$3495*** Package Includes:

- PROFESSIONAL SERVICES
- STANDARD GRAVE LINER (VAULT)
- CASKET SPRAY (CARNATIONS ONLY)
- MEMORIAL PLAQUE
- STANDARD CASKET
- DOVE RELEASE
- FAMILY CAR

*For a limited time only. Funeral Packages can not be altered or changed

Reese FUNERAL HOMES

17980 Celeste Road • Citronelle, AL 36522 • Phone: 251.866.0227
 Email: reesefuneralhome@gmail.com • Website: www.reesefuneralhomeinc.com

 www.facebook/ReeseFuneralHome

25% Senior Citizen Discount (65 & Older) | 15% Military Discount | This establishment does not own a crematory.

\$1495 FOR CREMATION WITH A SERVICE • INCLUDES URN.

DIVORCE

MOBILE DIVORCE LAW FIRM

251-438-7800

www.mobiledivorcelawfirm.com

No representation is made that the quality of legal services performed is greater than the quality of legal services performed by other lawyers.

Cool Air self storage

NOW OPEN

Secure ~ Climate Controlled

coolairstorage.com (251) 866-4040 Citronelle, AL

MEDICARE 101

Get the benefits you deserve



Adrienne L. Tucker
Independent Sales Rep.





Call to set an appointment

251-645-6565

No fees for consultation

6750 Airport Blvd ste D
Mobile, AL 36608
(across from Providence Hospital)

3578 Oak Tree Dr. ste D
Semmes, AL 36575
(behind Goodwill and BP Paint store)