



Photo by Toni Riales

ADAPTING TO THE NEW AGE OF SELLING LOCAL

Whether online shopping, a shrinking media market, being saddled with more debt or even up-cycling, there's no denying today's successful retailers are being forced to adapt a new business model to stay in front of new and existing customers.

Rule number one, according to **Danette Richards**, director of small business development for the Mobile Area Chamber, is a hyper-awareness of one's customer base and what they want.

"A business owner has three options, and they must get them right to succeed," said Richards. "You need to figure out how to recruit new customers, retain customers or upsell to your current client base."

Small business is more pivotal to a community's economic health than its ever been. There are a number of reasons for this, but one, according to **Quint Studer**, author of *Building a Vibrant Community: How Citizen-Powered Change Is Reshaping America* and founder of the Studer Community Institute, is that over the past few decades, most communities have lost the "pillars" that once sustained them. Globalization caused locally owned institutions such as department stores, hospitals,

banks, grocers, television and radio stations, and newspapers, to be bought by large corporations.

Richards points out that successful small business owners like Reney's Honey Butter, Harvest Jewels, Joe Bullard Automotive Group, Tony's Tejas Salsa and McAleer's Office Furniture are committed to adapting to a new way of selling. One example she gives is a furniture store selling new and used sofas and chairs, where it once only sold new items. Selling new and gently used gives a store owner an opportunity to increase his or her customer base, build brand loyalty with quality service and then bring that customer back into the store for future higher-end purchases.

These five Mobile-area business owners are innovating and shaking it up to keep the cash register ringing. If you're feeling inspired and more committed to buying local, the *Business View* offers a "no excuses" guide featuring 25 suggestions by Mobile Area Chamber staffers on items you can buy locally this holiday season.

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McAleer's is Office Furniture. That slogan has kept McAleer's Office Furniture alive and well in the Mobile and Pensacola markets for many years, including earning the Mobile Area Chamber's Small Business of the Year Award in 2015.

Started in 1979, McAleer's is a family business that has garnered customer loyalty along the way. “Loyalty and name recognition often makes all the difference when a customer recognizes our brand, sees our strong online presence and our website,” said **Melissa Cross**, president of McAleer's Office Furniture. “People may decide to go browse online first to look for what they want, but because they trust our name and know they will get local support and service, they give us a chance.”

Cross recognizes technology has changed customers' savviness about the products they want, but she says it has also helped them dispel misconceptions.

“How challenging it has been to convince people that shopping local does not always mean paying more,” says Cross. “We fight every day to let people know we are just as competitive as big box retailers or going online, especially when you consider you get local support for your purchase, as well as the best price. And you get to see and touch the furniture before purchasing it.”

Once she took over the business, Cross says the biggest change to the business was advertising. “Our primary focus now with advertising is internet-based, with search engine marketing, SEO (search engine optimization) and social media being our go-to strategies.”

“With a computer (phone) in our hands at all times, I think it is a positive that people are more aware. And when they truly do their research, we easily come out ahead,” said Cross. “In the end, what our customers most care about is getting the customer service and help they deserve. When you get that and you pay a good price, it really is the best of both worlds.”



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McALEER'S OFFICE FURNITURE

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