

RiverBender Blog: Shopping Small on a Budget This Holiday Season

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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I have to admit something embarrassing: I recently went to Starbucks.

Okay, that in and of itself isn't embarrassing. But when you think about all the great coffee shops we have in the Riverbend community — places that are sure to appreciate my purchase way more than Starbucks, a multibillion-dollar corporation — you have to wonder why I would spend my money at a place like that when I could have stopped by Germania, Maeva's or Post Commons instead.

My point is, as much as I try to shop local, I often mess up. Sometimes it's just easier to buy something at the last minute from Amazon. I drive by Walmart every day, and every now and then it's more convenient to pull in and grab a Christmas gift or a treat or whatever I need from there. I value local businesses over big companies, but my consumerism is far from perfect.

But I'm making a commitment this holiday season to buy all my gifts from small or locally-owned businesses. So I set off to do some Christmas shopping in the least expensive, most ethical way possible.

To begin, you have to understand that I usually wait until the last second to do all my gift shopping. I'm no stranger to the Dec. 23rd panic-buy; in fact, this is where I thrive.

But this year was going to be different! The morning of Black Friday, I cracked my knuckles and opened my laptop, ready to fight for the best deal from the safety of my living room.

Etsy was my first stop. This is not an ad for Etsy, so I won't ramble on about how great that website is, but it is great and, fair warning, a bit addictive. People who craft as a hobby or make jewelry for fun can turn around and sell their wares on Etsy. This is usually where I find my most interesting and unique gifts.

But, because these items are handmade by people who have to make a living somehow, Etsy is usually a little pricier than the big box stores. The artisans certainly deserve to be paid for their work, but those price tags mean my Etsy budget is a bit limited. I clicked "Add to Cart," winced at the total and dutifully entered my credit card number.

I had shopped small; now it was time to shop local. As we welcome the holiday season, there are more fairs and festivals where you can find unique products made by local artisans. I ended up at the Olde Alton Arts and Craft Fair, where crafters from around the Midwest set up booths to share their work. Later that same day, I stopped by Old Bakery Beer Co. for their Holiday Cheers Market, and then I hopped downtown to check out some of the shops owned by my neighbors.

One of the main arguments I hear about shopping small is that it's often pricier than going to a big box store. This is because small businesses have to charge more to survive, while big businesses can pay their workers low wages and still sell enough to turn a profit. While buying from a small business is undoubtedly more ethical, I do understand that it's a privilege to be able to choose where to shop.

But if you're like me, with a little flexibility this holiday season as long as you don't get too wild with your wallet, consider that shopping small and buying less is the better

option. Sure, there might be a few less presents under the tree, but the gifts you buy are bound to be more unique and of a better quality than anything you find at a Target. As I'm wrapping my gifts this year — probably on Dec. 23 — I can feel good knowing that all of my money went to people and businesses who will appreciate my patronage more than any chain store ever could.

My friends and family will get cool presents, my bank account is still alive, and I did all my shopping as ethically and locally as possible. I'd consider that a Merry Christmas.