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Supporting local shops crucial to cottage life

Our cottage is inaccessible by road, so we travel by boat. Each Friday, we show up at the marina and see families loading jerry cans full of gas they bought in the city onto their boats, then heading merrily off. But the marina sells gas, albeit for quite a bit more than city prices.

Ethically, shouldn't people support the marina where they keep their boats?

Absolutely.

In cottage country (wherever your place may be), small, local businesses exist in symbiosis with cottage owners. They feed off each other and neither survives very long if the connection is broken. Symbiotic relationships only work when both sides benefit.

City folk tend to forget a basic truth about businesses in cottage country. Unlike Walmart or even your local corner store, small businesses in places such as Huntsville and Wasaga Beach only have nine weeks each year to make a profit. They may stay open May 24 until Christmas, but, at best, they break even during those shoulder seasons. The annual profit must be generated between July 1 and Labour Day.

When you run out of milk, do you want to run back to Mississauga for a litre? Or drag your dead boat to Markham for repairs?

And there's something else to remember. Cottagers come to God's country in warm summer weather because in February, Port Carling actually sucks. But successful local business people work 12- to 14-hour days, seven days a week, during precisely the couple of months when it's nicest to live in these com-

munities. If you love boats, there's something counterintuitive about owning a marina; when the weather's great for boating, you're standing on your dock pumping gas into someone else's boat, while listening to them whine about the price.

So back to symbiosis. To deserve your support, businesses in cottage country have to provide service that's pleasant, prompt and available — open when you need them, not merely when it's convenient for the owners. Dare I stress again the word "pleasant"? When I shop at a big-box mall I expect to be snarled at; if I worked there I might be testy too. But in vacation country, business owners need to remember that folks are on holidays; they want to see smiles; they want their most difficult decision to be Chocolate Fudge or Moose Tracks.

But ethically, consumers have to hold up their side of the bargain, too. Of course there are things you can't buy in small communities, fair enough. But carting gas or groceries up from the city is despicable. When you run out of milk, do you want to run back to Mississauga for a litre? Or trailer your dead boat to Markham for repairs? Sure, you're going to pay more in cottage country; local businesses don't sell enough to qualify for volume discounts, local marinas pay more for gas than company-owned service centres on the highway — and there's still just nine weeks to make a living. But know this: If the marina folds and you have to drive to the nearest city for milk, it'll cost you more than the extra 50 cents you're paying now.

Symbiotic relationships are among the nicest in nature. But there's another kind of relationship that's less attractive, called parasitic. People who keep their boats at local marinas but buy gas in the city fall squarely into the latter category. Send your questions to star.ethics@yahoo.ca



Small businesses in cottage country typically have just nine weeks each year to make a profit.