

It's Not Just Business

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"Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative." - Oscar Wilde

It's happening. I'm on the verge of being Starbuck-ed to death. I also have a severe case of Subway-itis, and on Monday I'll likely contact my doctor to schedule a much-needed Barnes and Noble-ectomy.

In our quest for the predictable burger we've made our cities and towns as appealing as soggy fries. Of course, it's not all about burgers. Fill in the blank with your favorite product or service and Western culture has standardized, prepackaged, and built a familiar storefront around it in a neighborhood near you. Our nation's towns are beginning to have all the style of "Lunchables".

The worst result of formula businesses sprouting about this country like polyps may not be a lack of product diversity, control over our purchases by a small few, or disconnection between commerce and community; though these are all unsavory occurrences. The worst result may be this: We're being bludgeoned with the mundane.

Being bored to death breeds insurgency. Several communities in Colorado have pushed for aggressive legislation, such as the Community Vitality Act in Boulder, that attempts to curb the proliferation of formula businesses. Consider this the Crusade Against Conformity.

Critics of helping local businesses gain ground on national chains with bottomless advertising coffers suggest that crusaders for independence will limit people's choices. How can my choices get more limited? Almost every highway exit from Berkeley to Bangor offers the same hackneyed sights, sounds, and products. I feel like I'm stuck in a bad Jay Leno monologue.

These critics also argue that independent business owners are shrewdly trying to increase business by eliminating their competitors through legislation. Call me crazy, but I doubt that Mack's Bar and Grill is spearheading a revolution to topple capitalism (Although Mack does serve "White Russians". Should we hold him under suspicion?). It's really just a matter of Mack wanting to level the playing field a bit.

And what's so bad about that? I'm skeptical of those with complete faith in the so-called "free"- market system to erase all injustice. Ours is an imperfect world with social and economic systems that need tweaking from time to time.

Still, if we've learned anything by witnessing politics in this country, it's that money forever rules. As one independent business owner told me "The verdict is in the hands of consumers in regard to who is going to stand and who is going to fall. We vote with our dollars when we make a purchase." So true. We must ask ourselves: Do we vote for diversity and character or predictability and blandness?

In the movie "The Godfather", the Corleones inform people (usually before they do something bad to them) "It's not personal - It's business." This seems to be the mantra of formula stores, where one rarely feels a personal connection to the product, store environment, or the people who own the business. The mantra of independent businesses should be a restatement of the Corleone line: "It's not just business - It's personal".

And for many independent business owners, theirs are highly personal ventures. So personal, in

fact, that they're often right there to serve you themselves. Their stores and products are their unique visions, homegrown in Colorado, and deeply connected to the character of this area. They are people like Dick Valore, a third-generation owner of Valore Hardware in Littleton, who refuses to sell out to Ace and TrueValue in the name of his ancestors. They are people like Jim Garramone of Garramone's Produce in Denver, who will offer you witty conversation and the best fruit and vegetables in the city. They are people like Joyce Meskis, who owns Tattered Cover Bookstore, the jewel of Denver.

So give me Arvada Stationery over Office Depot, and I'll take Magill's World of Ice Cream in Lakewood over Dairy Queen.

If you're sick of chains, there's a remedy.

Independents can cure.

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