

## Columnists

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### Let holiday dollars speak by buying local

Buying locally for holiday gifts requires forethought if we really want our money to have a voice.

By Tom Watson

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Money always talks, but it speaks loudest this time of year.

As businesses large and small compete vigorously for our holiday dollars, we often hear the exhortation, "Shop local!" Although that sounds simple, buying local requires forethought if we really want our money to have a voice.

**Q:** Doesn't shopping local basically just mean buying from local stores and producers?

**A:** Yes, but "local" has many different degrees. A food item produced within 100 miles, or even produced anywhere in the Northwest, might be considered relatively local.

Many locally owned shops carry hundreds of items made overseas. Locally based companies that produce things may have most of those products manufactured overseas. And don't we support a locally based business when we buy from Starbucks or Amazon, even if the products are made-in-China holiday coffee mugs or iPads?

Rather than being doctrinaire about always buying local, it's best to be flexible, since no hard-and-fast definitions or criteria exist. Some consumers set a goal of buying at least a few products during the holiday season that were made or grown in the Northwest. Others may aim to shop primarily at locally owned, independently operated businesses.

**Q:** Why are those kinds of individual shop-local strategies important?

**A:** A dollar spent with a local, independent business produces two to four times more income and jobs for the local community than a dollar spent at a giant corporate chain, according to Think Local ([thinklocalseattle.org](http://thinklocalseattle.org)), a program from the nonprofit Seattle Good Business Network.

Products made close to home generate fewer environmental impacts from shipping, although recent research indicates this benefit may be less than originally believed.

One significant environmental and social benefit from buying local is that the seller of the product is generally much more accountable. Customers will likely trust a farmers-market vendor who personally attests that minimal pesticides were used on her fruit, for example. At a chain store, accountability requires a much greater leap of faith.

In addition, manufacturing plants in distant countries are more likely to have low standards for employee safety and environmental protection.

**Q:** How about a few examples of intriguing products made locally?

**A:** Cassie Hibbert ([cassiehibbertdesign.com](http://cassiehibbertdesign.com)) makes pendant lamps in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood. La Mexicana ([lamexicana.com](http://lamexicana.com)) produces tortillas and other Mexican food products in White Center. Photovoltaic solar panels (a whole-family holiday gift?) are produced in Marysville by Silicon Energy ([silicon-energy.com](http://silicon-energy.com)).

Impwear ([impwear.com](http://impwear.com)) makes children's clothing in Seattle. Soft Tail Spirits ([softtailspirits.com](http://softtailspirits.com)) in Woodinville produces vodka and grappa (an Italian grape-based brandy). Ask at local stores or search online to find hundreds of other local manufacturers and craftspeople.

**Q:** As a practical, local gift, I'd like to buy someone a "green service" for the holidays. Any ideas?

**A:** Several local, independent housecleaning businesses specialize in green cleaning, meaning that they use few toxic chemicals and try to reduce waste. Search online, for "Seattle green housecleaners" for example, and check references. Hiring a housecleaner makes a great gift for an older parent.

**Q:** What about experience gifts? Aren't most of those local?

**A:** Absolutely. Consider giving an "experience instead of stuff" to cut down on holiday waste. For instance, how about a gift certificate to a locally owned restaurant for that poverty-stricken college student in your family?

A creative cook on your list might enjoy an imaginative cooking class such as "Dim Sum and Then Some" or "Nuts about Nuts" at the Pantry at Delancey ([thepantryatdelancey.com](http://thepantryatdelancey.com)) in Seattle.

For the adventurous, how about a gift certificate for ziplining at Canopy Tours Northwest ([canopytoursnw.com](http://canopytoursnw.com)) on Camano Island? Or a Discover Pass ([discoverpass.wa.gov](http://discoverpass.wa.gov)) for Washington state parks?

Green and local fit well together this time of year, like a frost-nipped hand in a glove. That doesn't mean corporate chain stores are evil. They employ plenty of local folks, too. But when we spread our holiday money around, instead of always just seeking the lowest prices and trendiest products, it means more of us are likely to enjoy happy holidays.

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