

Helping Atascadero Thrive: A Community Responsibility

Atascadero News

April 30, 2010

Word Divas

Editor's note: The Word Divas, made up of Atascadero residents Diane Ramirez, Jeanette Morris and Susan Gaddis and Atascadero High School graduate Mary Weber, wrote the following business commentary. The group works together to write and edit various articles for numerous publications, as well as work they do on their own. They are donating their time to write articles about Atascadero. For more information on the Word Divas, go to www.worddivas.com.

Jim Lewis, Atascadero's Assistant City Manager, recently commented that the city is "very aggressive and committed to helping new businesses succeed in Atascadero," and "keeping people here" for shopping is essential to supporting our businesses.

Nevertheless, many Atascaderans are guilty of traveling over the hill, or via the Internet, to shop for items such as furniture, clothes, and other household gadgets. Do we believe that we can find better or cheaper merchandise somewhere else? Do we actually save a dollar or two trucking 10 or 15 miles to the north or south? Could we purchase the same product in our town and also benefit from the increased local revenue? As we shop "elsewhere" our local entrepreneurs struggle. Perhaps we need a paradigm shift in our thinking before we consider shopping beyond our city limits.

And how often have you passed by a closed business thinking, wait—didn't they just open?

The 2008 U.S. Small Business Economy Report to the President stated, "In 2005, more than 12 million people were involved in trying to start new firms. For 90 percent of these beginning or 'nascent' entrepreneurs, it takes more than five years after the process has begun for an outcome to be determined." But, do our first time entrepreneurs in Atascadero have a chance to make it those first five years and beyond? And what about our existing businesses—are there enough sustainable resources to keep their doors open?

According to Atascadero's Census Data, our city has 1,502 retail trade shops and 1,098 shops categorized under arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodations, and food services. Five of these local business owners generously agreed to provide input on how they've managed through the tough economy. They, like others, have had to cut back wages and key employees, downsize their shops and lower their inventory, and make personal sacrifices in order to keep their doors open. Even so, two of the five companies managed to add new employees, and one merchant opened her business with the current economy in mind. Their candidness offers local consumers (or would-be consumers) a glimpse into the heart of local merchants. Perhaps becoming better acquainted with the whos and whats behind our local businesses will provide the impetus to spend our hard-earned dollars at home and keep our community's economy thriving.

Thanks to Beth Van Valkenburgh of Serendipity Ceramics since 2004, Tina Wysong of Bella Cose since 2009, Ernie and Doana Raquipo of Ernie's Tire King since 1993, Stephanie Gee of

Punky's Italian Ice since 2009, and Karen Brown of Perry's Parcel since 2002, for sharing their thoughts with us.

Q: Why did you choose Atascadero as the location for your business?

PUNKY'S: I grew up here, and I enjoy this community.

BELLA: My life is here. I've lived here for 32 years.

SERENDIPITY: I bought an existing business in Atascadero and I live here.

ERNIE'S: Atascadero fit our vision: a place to grow a family and build relationships in the community.

PERRY'S: I wanted a change from the corporate world. And I thought it would be a great way to get more involved with the community.

Q: What do you hope to achieve by owning a business in Atascadero?

PERRY'S: It's great to work with other small businesses and customers face-to-face and know that my little business contributes to the commerce of our community.

PUNKY'S: I hope to teach my children the importance of entrepreneurship. I want Punky's to be a household name for years and years.

ERNIE'S: We want to be an asset to Atascadero by building lasting relationships with our customers. Our customers are never just a number. For the most part, they have become our friends.

SERENDIPITY: We remember you when you come back again.

Q: How does your company benefit Atascadero? Why should people shop at your store?

ERNIE'S: Being an independent tire store is part of the infrastructure of our community. We hire local high school students and train them up in a trade. We support local youth programs, charities, and civic organizations.

BELLA: We hope to bring more choices to Atascadero. We have brought unique gifts, apparel, and accessories. We hope to bring energy to the downtown.

SERENDIPITY: We serve the community by providing a kid- and family-oriented place to spend time doing something creative. It's a place for quality time for parents, kids, or grandparents.

PERRY'S: We offer a solid reputation for excellent service and products on a very competitive basis. Basically, we have a lot to offer under a single rooftop.

PUNKY’S: Punky’s Italian Ice is unique to the North County. It has the largest dairy-free options available.

Q: What is your opinion on big box stores? Do they threaten your business?

BELLA: Not at all. I cater to customers that want unique clothing--something they can’t buy at the big box stores.

ERNIE’S: When customers stop buying in the mom and pop stores in order to shop in the big box or large chain stores, a downward spiral takes effect. The small business loses a portion of its customer base. Even a small loss is great to small businesses that operate on a narrower profit margin than big businesses do.

PERRY’S: Yes and no, and you hope it evens out at the end. But once it is said and done, any business large or small simply need to have the right service mix, quality products, reasonable prices, and make the customers realize their importance to the business, or they won’t succeed.

SERENDIPITY: Big box stores don’t threaten my business specifically, but I think we have seen that they unravel the fabric of communities and, without question, do kill off local businesses offering the same products. But to a great extent, so has the internet . . . Big box stores are an unfortunate part of our current culture and seem inevitable.

PUNKY’S: There are benefits to having them in our community. Look at it like this—a big box store is just a family-owned business that grew bigger. The economy will weed out smaller and larger stores, regardless. The best will thrive. People will always want to maintain the integrity of a community filled with small businesses.

Q: What are your struggles, if any, in owning a business in Atascadero?

PUNKY’S: I also work full time at night, so my main struggle is finding enough time to grow my business.

BELLA: I struggle with the people that do not give us a chance. I make a point of shopping locally and struggle when other fellow business owners do not practice the same.

PERRY’S: I love our community. It would be great if there was more tourism, like Paso Robles or Morro Bay, but I’ve never looked at Atascadero that way, so I can’t really list that as a struggle.

SERENDIPITY: Probably the same as there would be anywhere else.

ERNIE’S: It seems the city government doesn’t support established small businesses. They bring in new businesses that compete with established businesses, and that undermines the client base.

Q: What do you wish the community knew about your business?

BELLA: We offer unique and great customer service, and if we don't have something a customer needs, we will make sure we try to get it!

ERNIE'S: That as we are given to, we invest back into our city whenever and wherever we can. That we are by no means rich, far from it (one of the biggest myths regarding business owners). That we love to serve our community.

PERRY'S: How much we have grown in the past 10 years in terms of products and service. We have a lot to offer and have fun doing it. We are definitely the definition and example of the saying, "We are a lot more than a shipping store." Also, I invite anyone that has never been into our store the opportunity to come on in, check us out, and enjoy a \$10.00 gift certificate on the house!

PUNKY'S: I want the community to know that Italian Ice is an option for everyone to enjoy! Italian Ice is dairy-free, which can be seen as a healthier alternative to ice cream.

SERENDIPITY: That Serendipity Ceramics is user friendly! We also have awesome air-conditioning during the hot summer months.

Undoubtedly, visiting a shop where people know you by name is an asset to building community. One strong message resonated within the heart of each of these business owners: to serve our community and establish meaningful relationships with customers. These small businesses likewise desire to reinvest into the community, provide family interaction, and bring distinctive products to Atascaderans. When we help them, they help us, and our community benefits.

Business owners close shops for many reasons, not solely for lack of patronage; however, considering our role in creating a city that feels and acts like home should be a factor in how and where we open our wallets. Let's purpose to exhaust the options of shopping in Atascadero before considering going elsewhere. Get to know your friendly neighborhood merchants by seeking out and supporting the wide variety of local businesses Atascadero offers. Our town's survival depends on it.

The above article was written by the Word Divas with Diane Ramirez taking the lead.