



**American
Independent
Business
Alliance**



Six Common Mistakes

That Kill Buy Local
Campaigns

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Buy Local Right

Inspired by the success of many grassroots groups, hundreds of U.S. communities have initiated “Buy Local” campaigns in recent years, and with good reason—they can be a powerful tool to help local entrepreneurs while creating local wealth.

However, only a fraction of those campaigns endure to create real shifts in culture and spending. While hundreds of campaigns have started in recent years, many have faded away quickly.

But don’t let that discourage you from what can be a superb investment. The good news is most efforts fail for reasons both predictable and easily avoided. Recognizing these common mistakes and learning elements shared by the most successful campaigns can help you succeed.



1. Reinventing the Wheel

Every campaign should reflect the culture, language and ideas of your community—local personality matters. But the core principles and best practices for developing effective campaigns have been developed, refined and collected.

Too many new initiatives consume multiple meetings discussing decisions for which best practices not only exist, but have been turned into templates and clear “how-tos” that will save you time and money.

Start by gaining a solid understanding of what’s worked and what hasn’t elsewhere. You’ll then have the foundation from which to innovate and adapt to your community’s unique circumstances

and a large network of peer organizations to tap for new ideas and ongoing improvement. You’ll also inspire ongoing engagement by showing people that your group moves forward effectively and respects participants’ time.

The American Independent Business Alliance is a non-profit organization that exists to help people organize successfully by collecting best practices and sharing useful examples, templates and how-tos across all member organizations. A review of AMIBA’s guides, references, templates and how-tos can help you get organized and charge ahead more quickly, so that you don’t lose volunteers’ energy and attention.



2. Including “Local” Outlets of Chains

Buy Local campaigns and Independent Business Alliances prioritize giving local independent businesses the collective profile and voice that they may have previously lacked and growing a robust independent business community. So successful campaigns focus on the positive virtues of locally owned, independent businesses.

Unfortunately, many municipal governments or existing business groups start campaigns with the goal of simply raising sales tax revenues or keeping sales on their geographic turf. But successful campaigns depend on the engagement of local residents and business owners, whose interest will be diminished (at best), if they see the likes of Target or Applebees framed as “local.”

Also, some residents will be confused or upset by seeing national chains and franchises included.

Local governments have played a key role in helping to initiate many successful buy local campaigns and Independent Business Alliances, often providing start-up funding and support for local trainings. But governments and conventional economic development agencies sometimes see themselves as having a responsibility to treat all businesses equally, and that may make it difficult for them to operate programs specifically for local independent businesses.

Unless policy and political direction explicitly emphasizes the importance of such businesses as keystones of local economic resilience, IBAs and Buy Local Campaigns may operate most successfully as non-profit or member-based independent organizations, with local government, chambers of commerce and foundations functioning as partners.



3. Homogenous Leadership

It's natural for people to think they should seek out others who are like-minded to join their effort, but beware: a diverse range of perspectives is key to reaching a broad audience and innovating.

Be proactive in recruiting board members who share a common vision, but differ in age, race, political views, affiliations and (for business owners) business sector and customer demographics. Non-business owners often can offer great insights, too.

If your group reaches consensus on important decisions too easily, watch out!

Also, take care to ensure your buy local initiative isn't reported or perceived as either a liberal or conservative undertaking. While political engagement to advance pro local policy is encouraged, the campaign should remain free of partisanship.

This is especially important if your efforts include 501(c)3 nonprofit organizations, which can lose their tax exempt donation status if they are involved in partisan politics.



4. Defining a Campaign Around Shopping

Of course, retailers are among the businesses most directly impacted by both chain and online competition. They are also often the most visible, and they may be among the easiest to recruit for your campaign.

But retailers comprise a minority of businesses, and they will be better served by a broader and more powerful campaign than one focused narrowly on shopping.

To build a strong and well-funded effort, you'll want to engage restaurants, print shops, farmers, accountants, artists and countless others who may not feel included by a shopping bag logo or urgings to "shop local."

This is why a majority of thriving groups choose names using inclusive language like "Go Local," "Local First," or "Independent Business Alliance*" paired with their community name.

Also, be aware many independent businesses don't have storefronts (about half of all businesses are home-based!) Consciously referencing agriculture, crafts, home-based businesses, internet-based businesses and others will ensure your message serves all local independents.



5. Not Demonstrating Bottom-line Impact

A few “true believers” may support your campaign financially out of altruism, but most business owners will need to see evidence of your impact to earn their continued financial support or engagement.

In addition to effectively advocating for local independents and driving public education in the community, be sure to articulate clearly how that work translates into concrete benefits for your constituency.

For example, don’t just tell business members they get to use your logo in their window and website. Calculate the number of impressions created by your entire membership, remind them how your pro-local brand reaches a broader

audience than any individual business can, and how brand awareness creates familiarity that makes customers more willing to try an unfamiliar business.

Use the data in AMIBA’s Local Multiplier Effect report to show the tangible impact on consumer decisions that your campaign can make.



6. Focusing Only on Consumer Decisions

Shifting spending habits of individual consumers is obviously one goal for your campaign, but it's equally valuable to encourage schools, governments and other institutions to do more local sourcing and spending. In fact, working to influence spending by these entities can create whole new business opportunities in your community.

But doing this effectively takes more than an advertisement. It requires both building relationships with local officials and engaging residents as citizens acting as stewards over their community, not merely as consumers.

Also, recognize local government actions often play a huge role in determining what type of businesses succeed. Zoning, tax policy and streamlined processes for small business all are key areas to evaluate and work to improve. Unfortunately, many communities have poor planning and perverse tax incentives that subsidize stand-alone big box stores or prioritize business attraction over growing from within. This costs taxpayers money and diminishes opportunities for local entrepreneurs, but engaging citizens can change local priorities.



Getting Started

Well-defined, organized and sustained public education campaigns have proven their ability to shift local culture and spending. In the most recent survey of more than 3,000 business owners, independent business in communities with a long-term “buy local and independent campaign” reported average revenue growth of 7.4%, nearly double the 4.2% increase for independent businesses not served by such efforts.”

"Building Buy Local Campaigns that Shift Culture

and Spending” is a pamphlet that will guide you through the essentials and offer visual examples from many of the most effective local campaigns. Thanks to underwriting from American Express OPEN, it’s available free upon request in both English and Spanish.

For more advice and how-tos, and to connect to the Local Economy Movement nationwide, visit AMIBA.net and join, or sign up for AMIBA's newsletter.

