

# The Local Angle

## *Why Bill McKibben believes booksellers can become leaders in the 'shop local' movement*

By Nigel Beale

**I**ndependent Booksellers of Canada Unite! You have nothing to lose but your returns! So, more or less, said author/activist Bill McKibben to a surprisingly perky early morning crowd at BookExpo Canada in Toronto on June 14. His solution to sluggish sales: turn your bookstore into a hot-bed of political activity.

That's right: touting independent bookstores as the backbone of strong communities, McKibben advised members of his audience to get involved in the 'buy local' movement by providing a venue for event organizers to plan activities, and serving as a resource centre for participating businesses.

The rationale behind this advice is rooted in a seemingly unrelated statistic: we North Americans, according to the 'latest polls,' are nowhere near as happy as we were 50 years ago. Despite cheap energy, easy travel, more amenities, bigger houses, heftier disposable incomes, tonnes of fun electronic gadgets, and the widest choice ever of music and entertainment, each year since a peak in 1956, we've become more and more miserable.

The reason says McKibben, has to do with lack of connection. Over the years houses have been built bigger and further apart; entertainment activities have become more solitary; we're more self reliant, less communal. Contact with others has steadily declined. Today we report having half as many close friends as did our counterparts in the fifties. More couples are divorcing. Those together are frequently sleeping in different bedrooms. It has been observed that counties in which Wal-Marts have put out the shingle experience a decline in political activity, in part because of a lack of meeting forums.

All is not lost however. During the past ten years the fastest growing sector in the food business has been Farmer's Markets. According to McKibben, people engage in ten times as many conversa-

tions during a visit to the farmer's market as they do when shopping at the supermarket. Similarly, in music, the growth is found in local live performances and festivals which are serving to bring people back together again: the consumption of art in the company of others.

Independent bookstores can and should, says McKibben, play a key role in establishing new local centres of gravity. Stores in one to two hundred communities in the United States have followed this path. Bellingham, Washington, for example, has transformed itself by committing to local buying. The place now enjoys a densely European feel. The economy is thriving, and at its core: a terrific bookstore.

The job of a successful bookseller, says

- Contact your local Chamber of commerce, or City economic development department to get a list of locally owned businesses.
- Invite local business owners to a meeting at your store to select a steering committee.
- Get some professional input. Check out the Business Alliance for Local Living Economics. Visit [www.living-economies.org](http://www.living-economies.org) to learn more.
- Collect the facts. Research the impact of 'buying local' on your economy. Apply for a grant to do this from your municipal government.
- Launch a campaign. Give it a catchy name. Educate your community on the value of buying local, and promote the products and services offered by local merchants.

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McKibben is to help organize the 'local' economy: to provide a venue for the exchange of ideas, where people can come together; to serve as a centre for political movement. Specifically, here are some of the steps McKibben suggests booksellers take in order to start local business alliances in their communities:

- Enlist the help of media. Create a program that features local business and/or local authors
- Build a website listing participating businesses to help local residents to buy local.
- Consider a coupon book. Have a look at what they're doing in San Francisco,

here: [www.thegreenzebra.com](http://www.thegreenzebra.com).

- Link localism to the environment. Fewer shipping costs mean less fossil fuel burned.


Once you've got this going, McKibben has a few more ideas to try on for size, if you haven't already done so:

- Invite authors from the region to speak at your bookstore—not only when they're promoting the latest book. Build a network of local authors—let them treat your store as a kind of home base. Authors who write on regional subjects are particularly welcome.
- Cook local. Using cookbooks for sale in your store, get local farmers and others to hold cooking classes instructing attendees on how to create meals with locally grown ingredients. Invite the local TV station to feature a similar segment on air.
- Invite local musicians, writer and poets to perform regularly in your store. Extend your hours and if possible serve locally grown organic coffee.
- Organize an event based on health and how-to-guide books you carry that emphasize aspects of you local community and economy. Ask civil leaders and others to lead discussion groups on how to apply the lessons found in your books. Lead the discussion. A lot of good books have been written on the importance of local economies and how living locally can help alleviate the looming environmental crisis. Set up a table in your store dedicated to books such as *The Omnivore's Dilemma*; *An Inconvenient Truth*; *Deep Economy*; *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*; *A Year of Food Life*; *Big Box Swindle*; and other staff favourites on this topic. Doing this will help stir conversation about how your community can reclaim its character and reconnect with its history.

Finally, at the end of his presentation, McKibben ran down a list of the top ten reasons for consumers to buy locally, at stores like yours. They are:

1. Money spent with local businesses stays in the community.

2. Small businesses create more new jobs.
3. Local businesses give the community its unique character.
4. Small business owners invest more in the local community.
5. Local merchants provide better service.
6. Small businesses increase competition and provide more choices.
7. Locally owned businesses leave a smaller carbon footprint.
8. Locally owned businesses use relatively fewer public services and less infrastructure.
9. Entrepreneurs and young leaders settle in communities that support local businesses.
10. Small businesses give more of their proceeds to local charities.

Above all it's important to convey that shopping local does not simply benefit a few business owners, but all the members of the community who enjoy the renewed energy, convenience and economic prosperity of their neighbourhood. 

*Nigel Beale is a writer, broadcaster and bibliophile. He hosts a radio program called The Biblio File. Read and hear more at: <http://nigelbeale.com>.*

## Going Local on the World Wide Web

*Internet resources Bill McKibben cited during his session included:*

**American Independent Business Alliance:**

[www.amiba.net](http://www.amiba.net)

**Business Alliance for Local Living Economies:**

[www.livingeconomies.org](http://www.livingeconomies.org)

**Community Alliance with Family Farmers:**

[www.caff.org](http://www.caff.org)

**Local Harvest:**

[www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org)

**Institute for Local Self-Reliance:**

[www.ilsr.org](http://www.ilsr.org)

**The Relocalization Network:**

[www.relocalize.net](http://www.relocalize.net)