

Sentinel & Enterprise

Local merchants gearing up for Small Business Saturday

November 27, 2015 - Black Friday has long been the stuff of retail nightmares and shopping glory and in recent years, Cyber Monday has also become a pillar of the holiday shopping season.

Between those two, however, is another shopping day that has been gaining traction with consumers -- Small Business Saturday.

To attract more customers who normally rely on big-box stores, the local business community has been working on solidifying Small Business Saturday as a regular holiday tradition.

"This weekend kicks off the holiday shopping season, and the idea of this is to try and let businesses here get a portion of that," said Raymond Belanger, director of small-business assistance for NewVue Communities in Fitchburg.

Since 2012, the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce has been working with American Express to encourage businesses in the area to take part in a combined effort to attract shoppers during the holiday season.

"In the past three years, we've seen a continued uptick in not only the businesses participating, but the promotions they've been doing," said Matthew Meyers, marketing and communications manager for the Chamber of Commerce.

One of the businesses taking part is painting studio and art gallery Art on the Rocks of Fitchburg. Owner Stacey Murphy said Art on the Rocks has been working to promote gift-card sales online and will sell all works of in-house art for \$10 a piece.

"There's definitely been more of a push," Murphy said.

"And now, customers are really thinking of small businesses."

Murphy said that until just a few years ago, she had never even heard the phrase Small Business Saturday. Since taking part in it, she said she has seen an increase in business. In Gardner, Dow's Shoe Store will hold raffles for gift certificates and merchandise throughout the day to bring in more customers. It will also have an "ugly Christmas sweater" contest that people can vote for on its Facebook page.

"We get a lot more business on Saturday, with a lot of people scheduling special trips to the store for that day," store manager Lue Roth said.

"Some small-business owners are more savvy than others and can capitalize on the holiday season, while others don't," Belanger said. "The key is to promote, rather than expecting people to come in just because it's the holidays."

Cutiques, the Leominster furniture and antiques store, is one example of a business that has taken that thinking to heart.

"We've been using social-media posts a lot to encourage our regular customers, but also ones who might be new, to come shop with us," said Natalie Silverthorn, Cutiques' manager.

Silverthorn said Small Business Saturday has historically been a good day for customers coming into Cutiques, unlike Black Friday, which usually doesn't get much business by comparison.

"From what we've seen, we believe there's been an increase in business since we started," Meyers said.

Though he was unable to give a total for the number of Leominster and Fitchburg businesses taking part this year, Meyers said the number has grown with each Small Business Saturday. In the first year there were only 11, which grew to 19, then 32 last year.

In addition to working with other small businesses and promoting themselves, Meyers said the key to success also lies in keeping a business current.

"I think they just have to continue to offer unique products that fit the market," he said. Follow Peter Jasinski on Twitter and Tout @PeterJasinski53.