



“THINK SMALL, SHOP LOCAL” IN ATHENS!

By Jonathan Vickers

There are those who tend to think smaller communities in our area don't offer much in retail or services compared to larger cities or towns that have big box retail stores and every service a consumer could want. Don't tell that to Reg Smith, owner of Athens Hardware on Main Street in Athens. Reg is a resident of Athens and a successful long time businessman who truly believes that small business can compete and thrive in today's sometimes overcrowded and highly competitive retail landscape.

Reg should know, he has been running successful small businesses in Eastern Ontario for over 25 years. Reg and his wife currently owns and operates 6 small businesses and was the past owner of Cedar Valley Golf Club just outside of Athens, as well as a land developer in SW Ontario. He is a member of the local chamber of commerce and when the community calls on him to help out with various causes, Reg, like many other local business owners, helps out whenever he can.

When asked what makes a successful small business run in today's business climate, Reg comments "It's all about keeping a high quality of service along with competitive

pricing. Consumers want to deal with a real person that is knowledgeable about the products they carry." He goes on to say that "customers are still able to get that personal service from a small business, and still get access to any product they require. We are actually seeing a trend whereby consumers are coming back to the smaller retailer because they can be competitive and they do offer unique products and services." He recounted to me how his hardware business is part of a buying group that gives him access to over 70,000 items which gives him the same competitive advantage big box retailers or other Hardware chains have in purchasing, so he can deliver pricing just as competitive or better to his clients. "It is also important that business people understand how e-commerce, internet and social media are useful tools for today's business owner. Businesses need to adapt to the changes in consumer behaviour. Our hardware store is in the process of upgrading our website to allow customers to view the variety of products we have, both in store, as well as special order." Reg tells me that he does not just rely on the local population as his customer base, but rather, he reaches outside of the local area to find other

customers. He also says he supplies a factory in Quebec with all their hardware needs and ships products across Ontario from his location in Athens. "It's about buying smart and constantly reviewing your buying partnerships with different suppliers" he added.

Reg believes for a small community, Athens has a lot to offer its residents and the residents of Athens Township and outlying areas. "We have people that shop in town from Lyndhurst, Seeley's Bay, Delta, Lyn, and the Township of Elizabethtown-Kitley, not to mention our seasonal cottagers from Charleston Lake. So we have a decent trading market for consumers," he said.

"If you look at our Main Street, we have a Department Store (Stedmans) that supplies clothing and dry goods, a very good grocery store (Freshmart), a Pharmacy (Pharmasave) and a Hardware store. We also have some other businesses like Restaurants and Cafés in town, gas stations and car repair garages, a Realty Company (Burt Hudson Real Estate Brokerage) in business now 40 years, a florist and gift shop with new owners (Reid's Flowers) that have expanded this past year and a hair salon in the same location. For a small community, we have the right mix of businesses and we also have great services in the area as well. We have major employers like Tackaberry & Sons Construction and Howard's Bus Service & Travel, just to mention a few" he added. The point Reg was making, is that with a rural community, comes loyalty from the shoppers and they will stay local and shop if the right businesses are situated in the community. "With retail times changing, so should owner's thinking, when it comes to having the right product at the right time when the consumer wants it. You can't become complacent and think everyday someone is going to come through your door. You have to work for it everyday and provide quality products, great service, with fair pricing."

Athens, like some of our other small communities with small businesses and retailers, are finding their way as the economy keeps changing and consumers try to balance competitive pricing with quality of service. Athens, with its unique location, enthusiastic, strong community roots may yet buck the trend that is happening in other small towns across the province and country with stores closing, leaving their downtowns empty. With Slogans here in Athens like "Warm Hospitality Awaits!", and "Local Businesses keeping our Community Strong", there is no doubt they will find their way and continue to succeed. **LH**