

Local buying gets boost from internet platform

Written by By Finance New Mexico
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Bill Foster is a digital marketing master. The serial entrepreneur developed keyword and search-engine ad revenue for pioneering companies such as Infoseek and Excite and now wants to use his experience and knowledge to help local businesses compete with national chains and internet behemoths.

Foster is a founder of yellCast, a New Mexico startup that connects buyers with local merchants by providing search-engine results that go a step beyond Yelp, Google and Bing and offer an interactive portal where buyers and sellers communicate directly. With this service, consumers who want to shop locally don't need to call multiple merchants to find a specific product; yellCast provides the platform that allows merchants to respond to specific requests.

TURNING THE TIDE

Foster's interest is more than philanthropic; he intends to fill a market need and make money doing it. But for him, yellCast is also a way to reverse the trend of money leaving local communities when consumers purchase products online from companies thousands of miles away — a trend he helped create. "This is our apology," he said about the startup.

Shopping locally keeps money circulating at home and generates tax revenue that supports public services such as parks, community centers and essential services. According to the American Independent Business Alliance, every dollar spent at an independent local business returns an average of three times more money to the local community than a dollar spent at a chain store.

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Local shopping also reduces environmental impacts associated with packaging, processing and shipping goods over long distances. And local businesses are job creators, hiring local workers. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration, small businesses created 63 percent of the new jobs created in the United States between 1993 and 2013.

THE YELLCAST METHOD

Using yellCast, consumers can send a query to multiple merchants that appear in their search results. For example, a Santa Fe shopper looking for a specific coat — say a men's waterproof down jacket — uses yellCast to scan the internet for those keywords plus the place-name "Santa Fe." The shopper then selects the merchants she wants to contact for more information or to obtain a specific size.

Local merchants receive the request and respond based on inventory and accessibility. A local merchant might not have the product but can offer to order it. Searchers remain anonymous until their order is placed, and they avoid the unwanted advertising that typically follows searches on better-known platforms because yellCast doesn't sell or even save the information it collects.

Businesses can register on yellCast at no charge, and they only pay for the service if they respond to an inquiry. The service is currently free during the pilot in Santa Fe.

Santa Fe is the test market for the yellCast platform, and Santa Fe city officials hope merchants and consumers embrace the platform this holiday season. Founders expect to expand the service to other cities in early 2017.

To use yellCast, start a search at **yellcast.com**. Merchants can sign up by clicking on the Business Sign-Up link in the upper right corner of the website after scrolling to the bottom of the page.

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