

As small towns struggle, here's one Rx for success

By: Noel Hamiel

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Nine years ago, Howard students struck a telling blow for their community.

Deciding they didn't want to see their town fade away, they devised and mailed out 1,000 surveys to registered voters in Miner County.

The goal? To see what county residents spent within the county, and to learn what factors would influence them to buy locally. Nearly 70 percent of the surveys were returned, and the results were shared with business owners.

As a project for the Howard High School chapter of Future Business Leaders of America, it was a stunning success.

Gross sales in the county jumped from \$37.9 million in 1996 to \$53.6 million in 1997, a staggering 41 percent increase.

The study reversed the downward spiral in Howard, pumped new money into city coffers, and as a result, the town has upgraded its streets and bought a new fire truck.



Noel Hamiel,
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The lesson long trumpeted by local merchants (and not just at Christmas) finally hit home. The lights went on among Howard and Miner County residents. More of them were staying home and spending more money locally, and it paid dividends.

And it still is today. As the books closed on 2003, gross sales in Miner County stood at \$62 million, a growth of 18 percent over 1997, or about 3 percent a year. Not bad for a rural county that continues to fight the trend of an eroding population.

Not long ago I was coming back from a meeting in Pierre and, as often happens, I made a couple of stops midway, first in Oacoma, then in Chamberlain. Two businessmen and I discussed the state of the economy, and how it might be improved. Those two towns face the same twin problems that dozens of other smaller communities confront: A declining

population in their trade areas, which translates into a smaller customer base; and larger cities, like Mitchell, which attract those hometown customers. (Believe me, we understand the problem, too, as our big friend to the east would like nothing better than to make Mitchell a satellite community.)

I took a look at the most recent sales tax figures, and they illustrate the concern voiced by the two businessmen. Gross sales showed a healthy growth in Oacoma from 2000-2003, but retail sales grew modestly at 1.8 percent a year. Across the river, gross sales were up less than 2 percent a year for the same three-year period, and retail sales actually declined slightly.

I suggested that they get in touch with Randy Parry, head of the Miner County Community Revitalization.

Over the last two years, Randy has sent more than 300 copies of the students' study to communities around the country, from Washington to the Carolinas. The Howard story even made the Charles Osgood file on CBS.

Randy believes that small towns can still have a say in their destiny.

"Some of the reason for decline is ourselves," he says. "It's because of the mental attitude that we can get a better buy somewhere else."

The success of the Howard survey/study was tied closely to a South Dakota strength - small town familiarity.

"If you stop to think about small rural communities, it's the moms and dads and uncles and aunts and friends. And if the young people are leading the way, they become agents of change themselves."

I like that thought. I like the message.

So, why haven't more communities done it?

Randy believes it's about leadership and commitment. There has to be someone in the school or community saying, "We should do this."

If it works in Howard, it can work in other small towns.