

Time for change: What's a business to do to stay alive?

Reviving 'el corazón'

Part five of a series

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For decades, tourists and new arrivals brought outside dollars into the community and many businesses in the heart of downtown survived. But with a change in the economy and a stalled real estate market, many business owners — especially in the historic district — are struggling to stay afloat.

Rather than waiting for the ship to sink, some economic experts see now as the perfect time to start fresh.

“Right now, when it’s slow and we’re in the doldrums, is the perfect time to reinvent your business,” says Matthew Spriggs, a planning consultant and former economic development director for the town of Taos. “If it’s not working and you want to be in business, then you need to change.”

But change doesn’t come easy.

For once thriving and now barely surviving businesses, Spriggs suggests that owners seek a second opinion on things like merchandise, marketing and other fundamental business basics.

“The hardest thing for most business owners is really being able to take a critical look at their formerly successful business that is now struggling,” he says. “You need to bring in somebody to do an honest, out side assessment and get some honest feedback.”

Spriggs suggests hiring a professional, but many groups offer free or inexpensive help to business owners looking for a lifeline. (See sidebar.) In many ways, the economic climate today looks nothing like it did five years ago. Businesses face unknowns in things like consumer confidence and tax policy, making it hard to plan for the future.

But Spriggs says businesses should focus on the things they can affect. “At the end of the day, the only things that are going to make a difference are things you can control and influence,” Spriggs says.

Service, service, service

At the top of the list of priorities for many business consultants: customer service.

Bruce Ross, owner of Taos business consulting firm Ross and Associates (and former co-owner of The Taos Inn) is adamant that many shop owners don't do enough to make a customer feel welcome and appreciated. They market. They advertise. But they don't treat customers right.

"What owners do is they spend all this money and time and energy to get people to come into their business. And then they forget about them," Ross says. "It sounds simple, but for whatever reason, business owners don't get it."

According to Ross, a shopper's impression of a store or restaurant sticks with them and echoes through word of mouth. Reputation, for better or worse, has amazing staying power.

"If you've created a memorable experience for someone — even if they don't buy anything — they're going to tell someone about it," Ross says.

For businesses in the historic district, the importance of customer service might be even greater.

In the congested center of town, Spriggs says someone has to be willing to fight traffic, search out a parking spot and walk to a specific store — especially if the price at a local shop is more than at a bigger retailer. "You've got to give someone a reason to stop," he says. "And in order for someone to pay you more money, you have to provide them with more service."

In the era of big box stores and online shopping, the customer service maxim becomes even more important, Ross says. Competition on prices is tough, and you have to woo your customer.

Guilt-tripping them into buying local isn't enough, Ross says. You have to make them appreciate the personal touch that comes from being a small business patron. Otherwise, shoppers will go elsewhere.

"We don't have to shop local. It's not an imperative," Ross says. "And why would we pay more to be treated badly?"

Another way downtown businesses can compete with major retailers is to create a unique and inviting ambiance. Taos' historic district is rife with interesting monuments, cultural draws and charming architecture. But many out-of-towners who take a stroll through the heart of Taos after 5 p.m. are disappointed to find little more than dark windows and empty sidewalks, even at the height of the tourist season.

Spriggs says that needs to change. Younger visitors to Taos come to play in the mountains, mesas and the gorge, Spriggs says. They're on a raft or a mountain bike at 3 p.m. If you want to make a sale, you've got to be open when those people get back and wander downtown after dinner.

Convincing business owners to keep the doors open later hasn't been easy. Some have tried for a few weeks or months, only to see lackluster sales or barely break even.

But Spriggs insists that it takes several businesses (he thinks at the very least 30 percent) to stay open and to do it consistently before it will draw a crowd.

