Jun-1999

Editor’s Notebook: Whatever Happened to Main Street?

Michael Kryzanek

Bridgewater State College, mkryzanek@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol18/iss1/4

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What Ever Happened to Main Street?

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recent article in the business pages caught my attention. Staples, the giant office products company ($7.1 billion in sales last year) is getting into the dry cleaning and flower shop business. Tom Stemberg, CEO of Staples, has invested in a chain of cleaning stores called Zoots, which will offer drive thru windows and 24 hour service. Stemberg is also an investor in Kabloom, a low cost flower shop. Both Zoots and Kabloom are viewed by Stemberg as the next generation of start-up companies that will cater to the fast-paced world of the American consumer.

Both Zoots and Kabloom will offer Americans the essential ingredients of modern corporate culture – efficiency, low prices, easy access and nifty marketing. What Zoots and Kabloom will also offer is a challenge to the mom and pop stores of Main Street America. Competing with small, individually owned businesses on main street America is nothing new in the acquisition/consolidation/competition driven economy of the 90s, but the appearance of Zoots and Kabloom is certain to deal another blow to the old way of providing services in this country.

Wal-Mart has already pushed out the department stores and is making life miserable for the tried and true hardware store. Giant food chains like Stop and Shop have left the corner grocery store as a quaint memory. Even my local barber must contend with the national chains like ProCuts and SuperCuts. Thankfully, the corner saloon has yet to become a victim to this attack on small business, but there is always tomorrow.

The decline of mom and pop stores has not really created a groundswell of opposition along the Main Streets of this country. There have been some minor disputes over where to put the Wal-Mart or the Stop and Shop, but they have been confined to questions of aesthetics rather than small business economics. We have not had a serious debate over whether this country should have basic goods and services delivered by an anonymous corporate colossus rather than a neighbor who we know. Instead we become resigned to the power of bigness with all the savings and choices that it brings.

The attack on the mom and pops of Main Street, however, has not been the result of some sinister plot. Small business men and women have increasingly become sick and tired of all that it takes to run an enterprise with tax forms, workers compensation headaches, local health and safety regulations and the absolute necessity of hiring lawyers and accountants just to keep the government off their back. Many of these small business operators have come to agree that it is better to work for somebody else rather than endure the pain of ownership.

But by pushing mom and pop off of Main Street we surrender to the conglomerate with all its impersonality, its bottom line attitude and its distant control. Main Street becomes a subsidiary of a parent company that answers to a multinational with offices in London or Tokyo or Zurich. These are not our stores on Main Street, they are their stores. The global economy that sent the garment industry to the Caribbean and athletic shoe manufacturing to Asia has now begun to hit home as the corporate giants begin to show their face just down the block.

There of course is no stopping this corporate juggernaut. The old joke that at some future date we will all be working for one company may come to pass sooner rather than later. But Americans should take a little time out of their hectic lives and ponder what we have given up in the name of efficiency, low prices and volume. We may be on the threshold of relinquishing the enjoyment of seeing our neighbor succeed on his or her own, the confidence of dealing with people we trust and the pride that comes with enjoying a Main Street with a personal identity. Wal-Mart may have its greeters when you enter the stores, but the greeter is just another cog in a gigantic enterprise from Arkansas. Smiley faces only hide the fact that Wal-Mart has won, while mom and pop have lost.

Michael Kryzanek is Editor of the Bridgewater Review.