

5 Totally Free Things You Can Do to Support Your Local Economy

Supporting your local community is a positive thing—it builds relationships, it strengthens the local economy, and it makes your neighborhood a happier and healthier place to work and play. The most obvious way to support your surrounding community is with the choices you make with your dollars. Money you spend in your community is recirculated in the local economy instead of being extracted from it. This translates into more local jobs, more opportunities for local business owners and service providers, and more tax dollars that stay in the community. Supplementing your grocery shopping list with fresh farmers' market finds, choosing independent cafés and restaurants over national chains, and purchasing art and gifts from local vendors are all simple ways to support your local economy.

But what if you don't have the extra cash to contribute to your favorite neighborhood businesses? What if the bulk of your spending is already happening locally? Good news—there are a few creative ways that you can boost your local economy without spending a single cent.

1. Show your support online

There are many ways to show your local businesses some love by sharing them with your family, friends and followers. Never underestimate the power of a positive endorsement—take five minutes to write a thoughtful review on Google, Yelp or TripAdvisor. Follow local businesses on social media. Consider posting a Facebook check-in status the next time you visit your favorite neighborhood hangouts. Make a point of tagging local businesses in your snapshots on Facebook and Instagram. If you're a shutterbug, go the extra mile by doing a mini-photoshoot the next time you go to a local coffee shop or restaurant (get shots of the exterior, the interior, the product and the decor) and show off the space by submitting your photos to an online review site. A little effort on your part can go a long way in making your local businesses more discoverable online.

2. Attend a community event

Your presence can make a difference at community events—even if you don't spend any money. Public events often rely on sponsorships, and potential sponsors look at past attendance to gauge whether an opportunity is worth their investment. This means that you can support local events simply by showing up! By checking out a local festival,

you boost the overall attendance numbers, which helps attract more sponsorship dollars in future years. Plus, community events often provide some form of free entertainment as well as freebies and giveaways.

3. Do your banking at a credit union

This tip is about where you keep your money and not where you spend it! Your choice of financial institution can have a significant impact on your local economy. As financial co-operatives, credit unions have community development built into their bottom line. Credit unions follow the 7 International Co-operative Principles, which include “Concern for the Community.” Each credit union may embody the principle in slightly different ways (event sponsorships, scholarships and charity drives are just a few examples), but the underlying commitment to give back to the communities they serve is a constant.

4. Find a new purpose for your old stuff

Declutter your space and do some good at the same time. Remember that spring cleaning doesn't have to stop at your closet—look for books, electronics, sports equipment, children's toys, kitchenware, appliances, pet supplies, furniture, decor, musical instruments, and art and craft supplies that you no longer use. Donate things you no longer need to a local charity thrift store. Keep your eye out for clothing or book drives in your neighborhood. Check to see if any schools or organizations in your area hold multi-family yard sales and consider participating. Find out if there are any lending libraries nearby. Whether you ultimately decide to donate or sell your old stuff, keeping it in your community and out of the landfill contributes to the local economy.

5. Share your skills

Donating your time and sharing your expertise is an extremely valuable way to give back to your community. Reach out to your local library or community center and see if there are any volunteer opportunities available. Alternatively, offer to lead a class or workshop in a topic you're knowledgeable about. Practical resumé-boosting topics—such as computer and smartphone skills—are often in high demand. By sharing your talents, you can contribute to others' successes, which feeds back into the local economy.