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### East VC companies pin hopes on Small Business Saturday

By [Marissa Nall](#) / Friday, November 20th, 2015 / [No Comments](#)



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Amanda Schumacher, hostess at Yolanda's Mexican Cafe in Simi Valley, stands in front of a wall promoting special deals.

More than half of consumers nationwide are aware of a third shopping holiday sandwiched between Black Friday and Cyber Monday but tri-county businesses may not know how to participate.

Small Business Saturday is an event sponsored by American Express and the U.S. Small Business Administration that has encouraged consumers to “shop small” at stores in their communities since 2010.

“Neighborhood Champions” like local chambers of commerce, business associations and individuals in the community also

play a role in advocating for independent businesses that can get lost in the holiday marketing frenzy following Thanksgiving.

Record numbers of these advocates have signed up across the nation, according to survey results released by American Express in conjunction with the National Federation of Independent Businesses. The same survey indicates that 77 percent of consumers plan to shop at small businesses this holiday season and 55 percent plan to shop specifically on that Saturday.

MDF Instruments, a web-based medical supplies company headquartered in Westlake Village, registered for the event for the first time this year. Stephanie Hall, a customer service representative for MDF, said that she usually sees an uptick in sales around the holidays from local medical professionals and students.

“I think that it’s a great thing,” Hall said of Small Business Saturday. The company plans to reveal its holiday deals right before Thanksgiving and also plans to participate in Cyber Monday.

“That’s still new territory for us as well,” she said.

This year, though, there will be changes for consumers and participating area businesses, many of whom did not realize they have been highlighted as part of Small Business Saturday.

In previous years, the company offered its cardholders cash back rewards for shopping at qualified stores on the holiday. For every \$25 spent at stores that registered with American Express, consumers received a \$10 credit on their statements.

In lieu of that this year, stores that register to participate can receive marketing materials, both for their physical location and their website or social media profiles.

“We just kind of somewhat recently formed a marketing scene and that’s brought a lot of really cool creative ideas and we’re trying to expand on those,” Hall said. “We’ll have our deals up on our website and we do a lot of social media and blogging so it’ll be across our different platforms.”

After successful community efforts last year, the credit card company has also encouraged communities to create scavenger hunts or other in-store events to connect small businesses and provide a more holiday feel to the emerging tradition.

“We’re putting all of our resources into various free marketing materials at [shopsmall.com](http://shopsmall.com),” said Nicole Reyhle, spokeswoman for American Express. “We do offer some event ideas and case studies from past years. We were fortunate to connect with and hear from some successful small businesses so other communities can do the same.”

Despite this, some businesses, like Yolanda’s Mexican Cafe with four locations in Ventura County, were not aware they were listed as a qualifying business on the American Express “Shop Small” website and have chosen not to participate in the day.

“We have a really wonderful regular clientele at all the locations, which is great,” said Leslie Gietzen, general manager for the Simi Valley restaurant. “We like to definitely take care of local businesses, we try to do our local charities and stay involved in everything at our immediate local community.”

Most of the buzz for their business is generated by word of mouth and November usually means a slowdown before a big December push from nearby businesses for parties and catering.

The changes by American Express could impact turnout by consumers, she said.

“Everybody is looking for the reward,” Gietzen said. “We’re just far enough away from the shopping. Our other locations that are near the shopping mall see more traffic. Everybody wants to get something so we’ll see.”

There might still be a benefit to consumers, said **Eric Sachs, CEO of Sachs Marketing Group in Westlake Village.**

“It’s really just a confidence indicator,” Sachs said. “There are protections built into that if you want to take advantage of them. If you’re an American Express holder and you purchase something from an American Express vendor, you do so with confidence.”

The company is itself a participant in Small Business Saturday and Sachs said the marketing materials provided by American Express would be beneficial to companies with an online presence.

Small businesses who don’t have the budget for advertising also win when they are featured by well-known names like American Express.

“I think it just adds another layer of credibility,” Sachs said. “It’s like being a member of the Better Business Bureau or the Business Consumer Alliance, just quality indicators or confidence indicators.”

The survey found that 80 percent of consumers are willing to spend slightly more at a small business than they would when shopping at a large retailer or online.

“Every year, the numbers have increased as far as businesses, communities and customers alike,” Reyhle said. “It’s a fantastic way, as a consumer, to say thank you to the small businesses in the community.”

Without the tangible rewards, though, consumers may not want to spend money that could go farther on a Black Friday or Cyber Monday deal, Sachs said.

“Some people are going to go out and shop because it’s tradition to go out on Thanksgiving, on Black Friday and stand in the lines,” he said. “There are some people who have no interest in going out to shop and they’d rather do everything on Amazon from home.”

Regardless, five years is too short for the day to have become tradition for American consumers, Sachs said.

“It’s a concept of reciprocity. They should have stuck with that,” he said.

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