

South Fork 2008 BUSINESS

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Bringing Main Street Into Your Living Room

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Local businesses are feeling the squeeze from several angles, not the least of which is cyberspace. Without the prohibitive cost of rent and overhead associated with a main street store, internet businesses can set up shop virtually in your living room.

Indeed, "you are putting yourself at a disadvantage if you don't embrace the internet," said Greg Darvin.

Most importantly, the internet is giving businesses that usually do not have a prominent storefront a presence in the marketplace.

Mr. Darvin is the owner of Pristine Pools and River Rock Landscaping in East Hampton, both local businesses that use a website to showcase his work. And while a project is in progress, the internet allows him "to work quickly and more inexpensively with architects and builders when exchanging plans. Instead of relying on FedEx for a one-day turnaround, we can receive plans via e-mail and manipulate them and return them in minutes."

Even the "small town" aspect of the East End is linked to the internet and the area is reflecting a larger trend. Nationally, the number of small or moderate businesses making use of the internet is growing, but it has still not been a deluge. Last year, a survey by the marketing firm Jupiter Research found that only 36 percent of all businesses with fewer than 100 employees had a web presence.

On the other hand, the Kelsey Group,

a market research company, estimates that sales revenue from internet yellow pages and searches for local businesses on wireless devices will increase to \$13 billion by 2010, up from \$3.4 billion in 2005. According to the National Retail Federation, 39 million consumers in the U.S. did their 2007 holiday shopping online—some of them, inevitably, in our East End backyard.

The nature of the internet can be especially useful with local cutting-edge businesses that might otherwise be

first impression, so it's an important business tool, no longer an afterthought," said Roger Feit, owner of Tree-Wise Organics in East Hampton.

But what if you don't? What if your website doesn't make a good impression?

"That's like showing up on the first day of the job in a dirty old truck," Mr. Feit said. "It doesn't inspire much confidence."

"From a pure marketing standpoint, the internet is great for being able to

"We are definitely embracing the internet," said Christy Cober, operations manager of the company that runs Nick & Toni's, Rowdy Hall, and La Fondita in East Hampton and Townline BBQ in Sagaponack.

"We have launched websites for each of our businesses allowing our customers easy access to our menus," she continued. "One of our goals in doing this is to move toward becoming a more eco-friendly, paperless company."

What about companies that could view the internet as direct competition?

"I think that people come in because they like to hold books and have great book conversations, said Bookhampton owner Charline Spektor.

"At the same time," she added, "we've come to realize that the internet is now part of everyone's household, so we have gone online at bookhampton.com."

The internet is becoming so prevalent that—at least here on the East End—it can spawn virtual shops.

"I started with the internet, and that allowed me to establish a business presence," said Jill Lynn Brody, a custom jewelry designer in Southampton at jillynndesigns.com. "With a website, it's like having a shop open 24/7 for customers to view what I have and can do. It's a showcase that never shutters. It is the best way to inform people of what you do. Really, today, locally or anywhere, every business should have a website."

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hard-pressed to gain attention among the more traditional companies. An example is Green Logic, a business in Southampton that provides alternative energy products.

"We ask customers how they heard about us, and roughly half say it was through the internet and seeing our site. It's been a very meaningful generator of business," said owner Marc Clejan. "It's worth it that every year we'll spend \$10,000 to expand, upgrade, and add more information to the website."

Like traditional storefronts, business owners must continually update their cyberstores.

"Your website has to make a good

promote our product and services," said Keith Davis, owner of four Golden Pear retail locations on the East End. "If people even think of your brand, they Google it, and that's a big benefit to having a website."

"Where I've really seen a direct increase in business is in the catering," Mr. Davis said. "People from anywhere, and months ahead of an event, can access the catering menus. You don't have to go out and sell anyone. They come to us."

Local sit-down restaurants are seeing advantages too because patrons are more intent on going to a particular establishment knowing what they want when they get there.