

University Camera and Paul's Discount – A Disturbing Trend

Many years ago, local retailer Paul's Discount bought its lapel name badges for its employees from my business. Every time they hired a new person, we'd receive an order indicating the top line of the badge should say "PAUL'S" and the bottom line would be the new worker's first name.

One day we received an order that specified the employee's first name on top and the business name below. We assumed it was an error, so we sent them the badge in the usual format. Shortly thereafter I happened to field the phone call from a lady at Paul's who said, "We can't use this."

When I pointed out they had chosen the wrong format, she said, "I know, but the employee's name is Dick." After an awkward pause that lasted longer than it should have, I finally said, "I see the problem."

For some reason that's the first thing that came to my mind when I learned that Paul's is scheduled to close on July 31. This follows on the heels of the shuttering last month of another longtime locally-owned independent business, University Camera.

I was asked why someone else didn't buy the camera store to continue operating it, and I replied, "There's no future in that line of retail business and there hasn't been for at least ten years." In an age when 97% of all U.S. adults under the age of 44 carry cellphone cameras – none of which were purchased at University Camera – it's a wonder it held on as long as it did.

Retailers continue to close – independents as well as big-box chain stores. Google up "Amazon kills small business" for a list of longstanding firms with household names that are now struggling. Amazon and other online retailers can take the bulk of the blame - if that's the right word - but they are just the conduits for you and me, the consumers driving this process.

I'll spare you the analytics of how much a dollar spent locally benefits the local economy, but it's significant. We all rely on our local economy in one way or another. I'll buy anything I need that I can find at a bricks-and-mortar store, but

I'm not completely immune to the siren call of Amazon. It has lower prices than anyone else, right?

Well, no, but they spend a lot of marketing dollars to reinforce that perception. Like any other business they have some great prices but also some surprisingly high prices that you'll pay unless you compare every selection you make to a non-Amazon vendor.

If you are one of an estimated 90 million Amazon Prime members, you are probably less likely to compare prices before buying on Amazon, but you should. Recently, Google's price comparison site (google.com/shopping) showed better prices than Amazon on nearly 60 percent of Amazon bestsellers, according to the pricing firm 360pi.

Jet.com, another price comparison site now owned by Walmart, recently found you could find better prices on 46 percent of top-selling toys that were carried by both Walmart and Amazon. That's according to an article at recode.net.

Rick Marlette is an independent pricing consultant for my own industry; office furniture and supplies. To quote him, "Every week I encounter a fresh batch of wildly misrepresented, contradictorily described and confusingly packaged products on the Amazon site. These are not bizarre products, but everyday common supply type items."

While we're on the topic we may as well factor in some other online buying hazards: fake reviews, fees that are hidden until late in the purchasing process, counterfeit goods, orders that never arrive and possible identity theft to name a few. Returns are estimated to be three times higher than for purchases made at brick-and-mortar stores. Not to mention your email address possibly ending up on numerous spam engines.

We'll all continue to buy where we choose for a myriad of reasons. And the supply channels will evolve into what we deserve, which may not be what we really want.

Writers Group member Dave Parsons is happy to report that in 2017 his small business technically earned \$4.5 billion more in profits than Uber, which reported a loss of that same amount.