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OUR TOP FIVE PROJECTS

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BALLE BEAT

Don Shaffer

YOU may be wondering, "What does BALLE do?" You may say: "I understand that there are groups of small business owners all over North America who are creating 'local, living economies', but what are they doing, exactly?" "What are the benefits of being a member of a local network?"

The following "Top 5" list represents a sample set of activities from one of BALLE's local networks. This list comes from Local Exchange, the BALLE network in San Francisco, California. It describes a few things we have planned for the next two years.

I hope you find it useful and consider some of these initiatives for your own community!

#5: "SHOP OUTSIDE THE BOX" CAMPAIGN

In coordination with the City of San Francisco's Small Business Commission, we will conduct the third annual "Shop Outside The Box" campaign in November/December 2005. This program involves media outreach, neighborhood canvassing, and a major event in mid-December, with the purpose of encouraging residents to buy more of their gifts from independent, locally owned retailers during the holiday season. Additionally, the mid-December event brings local artisans and craftspeople to Union Square in downtown San Francisco to showcase their products. Mayor Gavin Newsom is a small business owner himself, and a big fan of what we're doing. He wrote a great letter on behalf of the 2004 campaign, stressing the value of preserving a healthy, diversified local economy in San Francisco. He also showed up at the mid-December event and gave an impassioned speech on the topic. We received tremendous feedback from local retailers, artisans, and craftspeople - saying they appreciated the boost in sales and exposure.

#4: SUSTAINABILITY PLEDGE

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One of the most significant benefits of membership in Local Exchange, or any BALLE network, is the close association with other business owners who share similar values and objectives. The network functions as a peer group of advisors, where members get together periodically to discuss specific issues related to marketing, distribution, growth capital, etc.. In addition, they discuss ways to help each other adopt more ecologically sustainable practices. Local Exchange has a pledge system where members agree to annual sustainability goals. At the end of each year, these goals are reviewed by members of the group and new goals for the following year are formulated. This process pushes everyone toward the ultimate collective goal of making our ecological footprint smaller.

#3: ANNUAL WEEKEND RETREAT

Though small business owners are notoriously busy, we are hopeful that our first annual weekend retreat in summer/fall '06 will be a big success. Months in advance, we will survey our members to find out their most pressing business challenges, and then tailor a program to ensure everyone comes away with actionable learning. As business owners ourselves, we (on the board) know that entrepreneurship can be tiring and isolating. So the weekend will be designed to bring the San Francisco local/sustainable business community together to form lasting friendships and re energize.

#2: FINANCE/CAPITAL WORKSHOP SERIES

A good understanding of finance and sources of capital is critical to all small business owners. From September-December 2005, Local Exchange will host four workshops. We will gather some of the foremost experts in finance to help us create valuable "triple sessions" on the first Friday of each month - two workshop sessions in the morning, then lunch, and then one forum in the afternoon. The first session will focus on cost accounting/bookkeeping/cash flow; the second session will focus on equity/debt funding for sustainability-oriented businesses.

#1: APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

The San Francisco Bay Area is home to two MBA programs focused on sustainability: Presidio World College and New College, in addition to traditional MBA programs at Berkeley, Stanford and others. Over the course of 2005-2006, Local Exchange will develop an apprenticeship program matching MBA students with leading sustainable business owners. The long-term goal is to create a strong climate for sustainable entrepreneurship. The short-term goal is to help business owners get top-quality summer interns with minimal cash outlay, while providing unique learning opportunities for young people.

Of course we have many other activities, including speaker events, e-newsletters, coupon books, group purchasing programs, regional conferences, etc. Please contact us directly if you would like any further information or send brainstorms of your own. In particular, BALLE has recently published a valuable "How-To" Kit for running a successful Local First Campaign in your town or city. (The "Shop Outside The Box" campaign described above is one example of what we call a Local First Campaign).

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