

Local. Defined.

As the owner of Ellwood Thompson's Local Market in Richmond, Va., Rick Hood is on a mission to make everyone in his community a go-local believer.

By Pete Mihalek

At the intersection of Thompson St. and Ellwood Ave. in Richmond, Va., sits the city's most local-centric business — Ellwood Thompson's Local Market (www.ellwoodthompsons.com). From the name alone, this independent natural foods market exudes "local" and that's just the way its owner Rick Hood likes it.

The business started out focused on health and organics, but for the last seven or eight years an intense focus has been placed on the concept of what it means to actually be local.

"What it comes down to is creating healthy relationships and recognizing the bigger picture," Hood says. "If you can support local farmers, growers and vendors, it makes your community stronger."

He says today's consumers have more easy-access points to national brands than ever before and many of our shopping experiences feel like they can take place in Anywhere, USA — lacking in character and also taking more money away from the community.

"When you shop at locally-owned businesses then about \$68 of every \$100 stays in the community. When you shop a national brand with a headquarters somewhere far away about \$43 stays (in the community)," Hood explains. "On our website, in our store and on social media, we try very hard to make this information known to our customers. They need to know they make a difference."

How Far is Local?

Ellwood Thompson's sells approximately 15 to

20 types of herb seeds from Southern Exposure Seed Exchange, located 38 miles from the store.

"38 miles? That's local," Hood says. "People use the word 'local' pretty loosely. Some national brands define local as a one-day truck haul. That can be 500 to 600 miles. Others define it as coming from within the state. Our definition of local is within 100 miles."

As Richmond continues to grow to appreciate this go-local movement, Hood thinks this distance can shrink.

Hood says he'd like to make the concept of being local more visual for customers. "I'd like to do more mapping on store signage and on the website so people know the vendor's proximity."

Community Center(ed)

In addition to signage and website information, the market's newest addition has excelled in bringing the community closer together.

"We opened our Community Room eight months ago," Hood says. "It's 600 square feet and in a prime location right at the front of the store."

From organic lawn care and rain barrel workshops to yoga and Cheese 101 classes, the Community Room hosts upwards of 80 events per month.

"Just last week 40 [attendees] came out to hear Amy Hicks of Amy's Garden — which is a local and organic farm — talk about planning their summer gardens," Hood says.

He adds, "I think there's real value in the story of our farmers, growers and vendors and making them recognizable in the community. We really try

to bring them in to meet our customers."

When a customer cares about where they live and then comes to the store and sees pictures and unique information about a farmer and their family history or where and how they grow their product, people get interested and want to support that, the owner says.

"It feels good to support your neighbor," he says. "We all want to be connected today. Social media is proof of that."

In a sense, Ellwood Thompson's Community Room has become the embodiment of the local mission Hood and his team believe in.

"It's become a venue for us to really open up a dialogue with customers," he says.

There's no doubt Rick Hood is truly passionate about making the residents of Richmond believers in buying local, but as a true businessman, he also enjoys the "limitless" marketing potential of the local movement. And while there are so many variables to make a business' message unique — location, history, residents, etc. — its success relies on how genuine the owners truly are about it.

"If you have an authentic mission on helping your community, today's young people are especially attracted to that," Hood says. "They're receptive to how genuine you are or if you're just about making a buck."

"If you're doing the right thing, then you're attractive to your staff; then they become more passionate; then the products become more attractive to your customers; and then the success will come." **LGR**

