

Even the Amish are going online to make sales

January 8 2016, by Suzette Parmley, The Philadelphia Inquirer

With the explosion of online shopping, few can deny the power of the Internet.

Not even the Amish and Mennonites, known for being devout to their faith and for shunning technology, electricity and modern advances that run counter to those beliefs.

It raises an intriguing question: Can the Amish and online co-exist?

"It is interesting that commerce is forcing even the Amish to adapt to the online retail world," said Barbara Khan, director of the Jay H. Baker Retailing Center at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. "It isn't social pressure that is forcing the cultural change, but, rather, economic necessity."

The next generation of Amish who have grown up in business admit as much, while the numbers affirm what many know: Online retailing is growing at the expense of traditional stores.

Brick-and-mortar retail sales on Black Friday fell from \$11.6 billion in 2014 to \$10.4 billion in 2015, according to the retail researcher ShopperTrak. Sales on Thanksgiving fell from just over \$2 billion in 2014 to \$1.8 billion in November. Both drops are due to the rise in online sales.

Meanwhile, online sales jumped 14 percent on Black Friday from 2014,

and brought retailers \$2.72 billion altogether in November. The increase came during a week of [online sales](#) and promotions leading up to Cyber Monday on Nov. 30, which turned out to be the biggest e-commerce sales day ever, topping \$3 billion for the first time.

Sam Riehl, 26, wants to boost online orders by next year at L. Halteman Family Country Foods in downtown Philadelphia.

Riehl works behind the counter Monday through Saturday. Like all Amish, he rests on Sunday.

But he represents the progressive, tech savvy side of the Plain People. Riehl is aiming to grow the family business and offer online delivery of the family's key products, ranging from ground beef and pork to homemade jams and jellies, within a year.

"My generation is more advanced," Riehl said recently while working the busy lunch crowd. "We feel the Internet is really important to grow a business, and we have to do more on the Internet."

Meanwhile, about an hour's drive away, it seems as if you're in another world as soon as you arrive in Gap, Lancaster County. For miles, you travel through picturesque rolling hills. A few horse-drawn buggies putter by on the side of the road.

Then you get to the heart of Amish Country, the tourist hub, in a town called Intercourse.

A visitor comes across a well-lit store decorated with pieces of furniture at the front entrance. This is Snyder's Furniture, a 30-year-old shop that is on the online superhighway despite its simple surroundings.

Snyder's specializes in handcrafted Amish furniture. It has had its own

website, www.snydersfurniture.com, since 2000.

"For the most part, Amish craftsmen and retailers are adapting to the challenges of 21st-century businesses and looking for ways around their beliefs to adapt to changing technology," said Keith Horst, the store's 29-year-old general manager. "They find a way.

"They won't fly, but they will go on trains," he said. "They don't drive, but will hire drivers. They won't have computers, but have very advanced word processors. They will have a fax machine, but a separate phone in their work shack and not in their house.

"They won't have machines run by electricity, but by air compressors and generators as a way around their belief of being unconnected to the world," said Horst, who himself grew up Mennonite, but is no longer active in the church. He graduated from Temple University in pre-law and drives a BMW.

Americus Reed, a marketing professor who focuses on brand identity at Wharton, said the Amish - like many other business owners and operators nowadays - are being compelled to expand their reach through the Internet.

"If the core customer goes to online, and that is where they are getting their information, and that is where they are going to actually purchase, then the mantra will be 'change or die,'" Reed said.

Horst said the Amish in Lancaster County are adapting, and many who run businesses now have websites.

"They realize they need it to stay in business," he said.

Snyder's store recently made three straight days of holiday furniture

deliveries to the Philadelphia suburbs.

They were big-ticket items, ranging from \$5,000 to \$10,000 and included dining room pieces, bedroom sets, and kitchen tables.

Snyder's uses its own trucks to make deliveries in Pennsylvania. For out-of-state deliveries, it hires an outside firm. The store grosses about \$2 million in annual sales.

Horst is focused on clicks-to-bricks strategies to get more people to view the store's website, and following up with emails to encourage them to visit the store.

He is busy these days, figuring out how to charge for shipping furniture, especially to the West Coast.

"We can have the cost built into the price of the product itself or charge a flat fee," Horst said. "Many people got used to free shipping from Amazon, and we just can't do that."

Standing in the store a few feet from Horst was his cousin, Andrea Groff, 26, wearing traditional Mennonite dress. She was wiping down furniture with water from a spray bottle and a cloth - her version of dusting, because Mennonites don't use silicone-based products.

As the office and sales manager at Snyder's, Groff regularly updates and freshens the company's website.

"They totally understand," she said of the shifting attitude among Amish and Mennonite businesses over the Internet. "Before, they were more closed off. In the last five to seven years, more are open to getting their products out there online. They are adapting."

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Citation: Even the Amish are going online to make sales (2016, January 8) retrieved 7 July 2024
from <https://phys.org/news/2016-01-amish-online-sales.html>

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