

Keeping it Local

Mobile app helps independent retailers level the playing field

by LIZ PARKS

Small local businesses can improve their ability to compete with large chain stores, thanks to a new platform called GettinLocal. Retailers can inexpensively create their own mobile app and use it to attract new customers and increase the frequency of visits from regular customers.

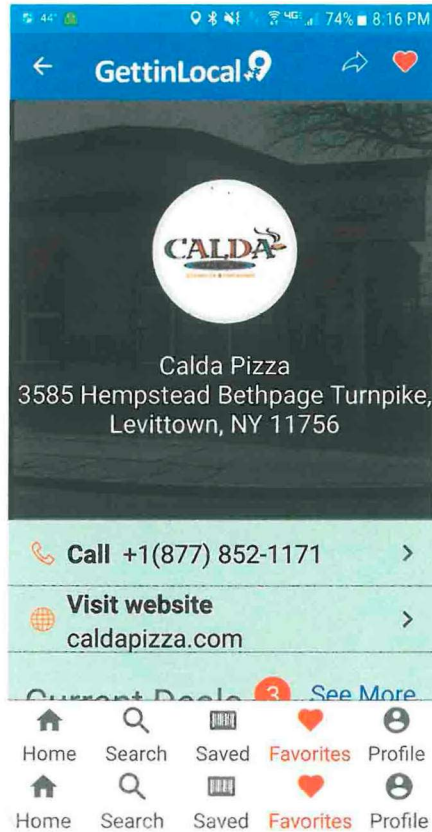
Chris Vlasopoulos, owner of Levittown, N.Y.-based chain Calda Pizzeria, has been using GettinLocal since January and says it's increasing sales at all three of his restaurants by about 10 percent a day. And there's no sign of that growth abating.

Vlasopoulos is one of a growing number of local businesses using GettinLocal to target their customer bases with very specific traffic-building promotions tailored to age, gender, shopping preferences and consumer keyword searches.

"I can really hone in on just the people who would be interested in a specific promotion or deal," Vlasopoulos says. "I know that when I do my total group email specials, half the people get annoyed because the offer doesn't appeal to them so it's junk to them."

He says he signed up for the program because it allows him to reach and communicate with both existing and potential customers without having to build a proprietary mobile app from scratch. Registering to use GettinLocal took about five minutes, he says; adding the information he wanted to display, including menus, pictures of restaurants and hours of operation took about another 15 minutes.

When he wanted to increase sales by adding breakfast pizzas to his menu, he created a promotional flash sale message offering a free beverage to anyone who came in between 8 a.m. and 11 a.m. for a \$2 slice.



"It worked out really well," he says. "If you want to introduce something new to the market, GettinLocal is a good way to get it out there. It's like an email on steroids because you can target anyway you like, which you can't do with most other mobile apps. It's fast and easy."

To grow business on weeknights, Vlasopoulos created family night specials targeted to people aged 25 to 55. As the dinner hour approaches, a promotional message pops up on the cell phones of customers in that age group who have downloaded the app. The offer, dinner for a family of five, includes pizza, salads, pasta, garlic knots and dessert for \$30.

Vlasopoulos has created several similar promotions, all of which have helped increase visits and sales, he says. He also likes that GettinLocal empowers local



businesses. "It's supporting mom-and-pops as they compete against big chains," he says.

FUELING CONNECTIONS

To spread awareness of the app and encourage customers to download it, Vlasopoulos uses tools like table tent signs, notes in the menu and messages the servers wear on their uniforms. Customers who download the app are rewarded with a coupon to use on their next visit.

GettinLocal was developed by CEO Vito Pagano, along with co-founders Shawn Smith and Peter Daly. Pagano says GettinLocal is the first mobile marketing platform designed to support local business, "the cornerstones of our communities."

With the growth of online sales from global providers, “many of our towns are losing storefronts, along with that personal connection which has always fueled our communities,” he says.

“And with the rapid advancements in marketing tools — digital coupons, target marketing and search engine optimization — it can be very challenging and expensive for our local businesses to stay competitive.”

GettinLocal also lets businesses create links to social media websites. There is no startup fee, Pagano says, and no upfront development costs.

Pagano notes that he, like many consumers, does a lot of shopping on his mobile phone. By downloading a business’s GettinLocal app, consumers can not only support their local business, but often find what they are looking for at a price lower than leading online retailers may be charging. What’s more, he says, they can take home their purchase immediately, “no waiting for deliveries.”

CREATING COLLABORATION

A few months after its launch, GettinLocal had several dozen businesses using its app and is building what Pagano calls an “ecosystem of businesses” using the platform.

Retailers creating their mobile app specify the radius they want their app to be visible to consumers, be it two miles or maybe 20 miles from their businesses. Consumers who download the app simply enter their address, age and gender, along with categories that interest them such as food, types of restaurants and movies or sports.

Businesses using the app can collaborate with compatible other local retailers: A restaurant close to a movie theatre, for instance, can design a coupon targeted to people at the movie offering an incentive as they exit the theatre, such as “Bring your ticket stub and get a free appetizer.”

The overall reach of promotions extends to people “from as close as 300 feet to a business to approximately 50 miles away,” Pagano says.

Unlike generic coupon services programs which take a percentage of sales generated through their platform, GettinLocal does not take any percentage of sales. The return on investment, Pagano says, comes from growing the platform and continuing to enroll more businesses.

“Our philosophy is simple,” Pagano says. “Keep it local. Let’s keep customers and their purchases near where they live and work. Strong local businesses continue to define our communities.”

Vlasopoulos sums up GettinLocal with similar words. “It’s an excellent way to get to your customers, to throw out specials to specific customers so the message is not invasive, it makes sense and they can save money.” **STORES**

Liz Parks is a Union City, N.J.-based writer with extensive experience reporting on retail, pharmacy and technology issues.