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## **Some numbers that add up**

I won't pretend to be an economist. I don't expect to be reincarnated as an investment banker or financial adviser.

I know more about how to figure a pitching staff's ERA than a country's GNP.

Mark Twain once urged us to write what we know about. So I have to tread softly when I begin dispensing advice about how and where to spend money.

But here it goes.

While traveling a few months ago, I had lunch at a small, independently owned delicatessen. I noticed a sign on a baker's rack that said: "The 3/50 Project."

I had no idea what it was. I was about to find out.

The 3/50 Project has only been in existence for 14 months. It's a grass-roots effort to bring some common sense and stability to our local economies during one of the most challenging economic times in history.

It simply encourages consumers to select three independently owned business in their communities and pledge to spend \$50 per month there.

It could be the small restaurant down the street or the family-owned hardware store on the corner. It might be the second-generation tire dealership downtown. Or the men's clothing store where they know you by name when you walk in the door.

This is not a directive to stop shopping at the big-box stores, the super warehouses and national franchises. Some of those places are necessary evils.

After all, their prices are usually lower. And they have a better selection. No one is trying to tell you not to be a smart shopper.

In your 3/50 commitment, you may spend \$2.26 more on a hammer. So what? You'll likely get better customer service.

You probably won't receive 20 percent off the latest Stephanie Meyer book, either. Big deal. You'll survive.

Besides, the extra money you spend on the front end will most likely be saved on the back end.

Organizers of The 3/50 Project, which was founded by Cinda Baxter of Minneapolis, estimate that for every \$100 Joe, Sally, Bill and Anna spend at locally owned and operated businesses in their communities, \$68 comes back in the form of taxes, payroll and other expenditures.

By contrast, if Harold and Maude spend their \$100 at the national chain, only about \$43 will be headed back in their direction. Do the math.

If the money leaves town in the form of an Internet purchase, it may never find its way home.

OK, you'll probably get a better deal buying through a Web site. And you won't have to pay sales tax. But when you make transactions in the dark hole of cyberspace, you aren't exactly helping the little guys out there on the front lines.

You are not being asked to spend \$150 at three local businesses. Even if everyone divided the \$50 between several businesses, it would provide an economic impact.

Often, it's money you would spend anyway. This is simply redirecting how and where you spend it.

Obviously, there aren't a lot of bells and whistles to this idea. You don't have to sign up or pay a registration fee. There are no terms of use.

Even a remedial economist like myself can follow the game plan.

It's a simple formula that begins with a personal choice.

So you don't want to have to keep spending more in local taxes?  
Then start keeping your money in the family. Sounds pretty neighborly to me. Not to mention, intelligent.

I've seen enough Wal-Mart's come in and push the Mom-and-Pops right out of town. I grow weary when I see vacant storefronts, with their empty windows staring back like lonely faces.

It's all about loyalty. Think local. buy local.

If you can't do 3/50, then at least try a 4/30. Or perhaps a 6/40.

When you spend, you save. Maybe not money, but you save something even more valuable.

Think about it.

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