

The Secrets of Local Business Success

For the first time in several years, all of the retail space on Market Square will be filled when Jolly Good Fellows opens its doors to the public later this month. To mark this occasion, *Forest & Bluff* reached out to area businesses to learn the secrets to opening and sustaining a successful business in our community.



CB Boutique

662 N. Western Avenue, Lake Forest

When Mallory Ulaszek was looking to expand her Old Town boutique, Cityblue, into the suburbs, she couldn't imagine opening it anywhere but Lake Forest.

"I grew up in Lake Forest. I know how people shop and that they like to shop local. I knew what was available in other stores," explains Mallory. "I wanted to fill a need that didn't currently exist. It's what I did downtown. In my neighborhood, there wasn't a place for people to buy great denim and T-shirts."

Last April, Mallory brought these sensibilities to Lake Forest when she opened CB Boutique. But knowing her North Shore customer, she knew her merchandise needed to be different. "**It's department store designers in a boutique setting,**" Mallory says, "**classic wardrobe staples with a bit of a twist.**" And, in the last year, as Mallory has gotten to know her customers better and what they're looking for, she's made adjustments to her inventory. "When I first opened, I was hoping to appeal to both men and women. But I quickly learned that women were really our shoppers and we needed to make sure we were taking care of them," she adds. To this end, it's essential to Mallory that her staff understand client's body types, clothing, and tailoring.

One big difference between Mallory's Chicago and Lake Forest stores is the seasonality of her suburban shoppers. "I don't get discouraged because I've not known any different," Mallory says. "I opened my stores in a tough economy. That's why I set realistic expectations. I believe in my brand and in CB Boutique." — *Ann Marie Scheidler*

Bailey & Hart Interiors

506 N. Western Avenue, Lake Forest

Mary Ann Beardman has been passionately building her Lake Forest interior design business, Bailey & Hart Interiors, for 12 years. "The best advice I received when I launched the business was from my father, who was a successful business man himself," says Mary Ann. "His advice was to sell a product that I was proud of, never compromise my integrity, stay honest, and treat everyone who comes to Bailey & Hart with respect and kindness. I think I've done that. **We treat each client, whether they have a huge order or a small one, with the same attention and service. They deserve it.**" — *Ann Marie Scheidler*

Bedside Manor Ltd.

192 E. Westminster Avenue, Lake Forest

Advice Meg Carroll received nearly 30 years ago when she launched Bedside Manor, Ltd. still applies today.

"Have a direction, focus on it, and then let it grow," Meg says she was told back in 1985, when her first store sold brass beds, French linens, and Amish quilts. "Although our product mix has since expanded and changed dramatically, we continue to maintain our focus on everything for a beautiful bedroom."

Meg launched the Lake Forest store (stores also operate in Hinsdale, Winnetka, and Chicago) 12 years ago. She knew if she expanded into new areas, Lake Forest would be an attractive spot. "The established upscale shopping district in the downtown area fit our profile perfectly," she explains. "**We want to get to know our customers so we are able to offer them the products they are looking for and extend our very best service.**"

Service, in fact, is one area that sets Bedside Manor apart. A number of associates have worked for the company for more than a decade. "We take pride in our team, and they are a big part of our brand," Meg says.

Reflecting on the business, Meg said she wouldn't do anything differently. She does have helpful thoughts for new businesses poised to open in Market Square or elsewhere in Lake Forest.

"My advice would echo the same that we were given when we were starting out—have a direction, focus on it, and let it grow," she notes. "What I might add to that is to enjoy the work, be committed, and always be open to growth." — *David Sweet*

Blink Optical

654 Bank Lane, Lake Forest

Before opening their Lake Forest business in 2006, Yuri Kisilevich and his wife, Stella Shart, received advice especially appropriate for an eye boutique: Stay true to your vision.

“We knew we had the experience and dedication to make our business work,” says Stella, who with her husband possesses 20 years of experience in high-end optical retail. “Establishing a business takes patience, and we knew going in that we had to stay the course to create the exact shopping experience we both wanted for our clients.”

Today, Blink Optical on Bank Lane in Lake Forest boasts a loyal clientele. The couple is glad they chose to operate a business in town, citing the feeling of community in both the retail and residential parts of the city as a key to their decision. “We both had previous experience in North Shore retail and felt Lake Forest and the surrounding areas would be a good fit for our products and expertise,” Stella says.

She notes there is little they would have done differently over the years, though they wish they had possessed the foresight to establish the shop sooner. “We do sometimes muse about a larger space,” Stella admits, “but, then again, that might misplace the intimacy that defines our current location.”

The couple enjoys providing a personalized shopping experience for clients. What advice would they offer new business owners in town? **“You get one shot to make a good impression in this town, so make it count,”** Stella says. “Lake Forest customers are fiercely loyal and enjoyable to work with if they feel accommodated and appreciated. Give them your all, and you’ve got a customer for life.” —*David Sweet*

Caputo Cheese Market

231 E. Wisconsin Avenue, Lake Forest

In 1978, René and Pasquale Caputo opened their eponymous cheese market in Highwood. These days, Caputo Cheese Market is thriving in Lake Forest. “We wanted to open a second location and knew the demographic was a fit,” says Natale Caputo, President of the company and a Lake Forest resident. **“We simply wanted to give the Lake Forest/Lake Bluff community a Caputo family food experience.”**

The Caputos had reservations about the area’s “Michigan Avenue rent,” but their formula of quality and customer rapport has driven success. When Caputo’s first launched, the best advice they were given was, “Stick to what you know. Don’t try to do everything.”

To this day, Caputo’s makes fresh mozzarella daily—and ricotta twice daily—at its headquarters in Melrose Park and shuttles it to Lake Forest. Parmigiano-Reggiano is the store’s bestseller, followed by brie, goat cheese, and Italian cheeses. Complementary products include oils, vinegars, spices, pastas, and deli products such as Boar’s Head and Beretta from Italy.

“There is no product in our store that the Caputo family would not eat or drink ourselves,” Natale says.

He admits the life of a storeowner isn’t easy. Despite the hardships, the family and employees say they love what they do and have fun doing it. Natale shares what he calls cheese-and-deli humor.

“Our team members get a kick sometimes when multiple customers come in and ask for the same cheese all within the same hour or so—this tells us that they all just watched the same show on the Cooking Channel or the Food Network.” —*Angelika Labno*

Forest Bootery

284 E. Market Square, Lake Forest

Market Square is the Michigan Avenue of Lake Forest. “**It’s a premium retail location, with a small-town feel—it’s the best of both worlds,**” explains Cara Garrison who is the second generation of her family to run Forest Bootery. Cara’s family bought the store in 1976; 20 years later, she and her sister, Cristina, began to run the retailer.

If the sisters were to relaunch their business in 2013, they would make one significant change. “We wouldn’t call it a ‘bootery,’” Cara says. “Back in the day, everyone knew a bootery was a store that specialized in family footwear and accessories. Now I hear customers come in and say, ‘I thought you just carried boots.’”

Cara credits the longevity of Forest Bootery with its ability to keep up with the times and never forgetting what they’re known for. They also continue to evolve and expand as the needs of their loyal customers change. “We’re becoming more of a department store—carrying clothing, footwear, and accessories for men, women, and kids. Our customers are the reason we open our doors every day. When we do right by them, we succeed,” Cara says. —*Ann Marie Scheidler*

Imperial Motors Jaguar

150 Skokie Highway, Lake Bluff

For Jordan Aron, President of Imperial Motors Jaguar, opening a Lake Bluff location for his successful Jaguar dealership in Wilmette made perfect sense. “We had a lot of people traveling from Lake Forest and Lake Bluff to buy our cars,” says Jordan. “So we expanded our business to where a lot of our customers were coming from.”

Imperial Motors is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year, with 13 of those years spent in Lake Bluff. After decades of family experience selling luxury cars on the North Shore, Jordan tells us that it’s not solely about having a great product.

“Everybody knows you’re in business to make a profit, but they like to see you giving back to the community, too,” he says. “You have to let them know that you care.”

Jordan’s also been in the business long enough to see some fairly consistent patterns emerge amongst his clients. Any entrepreneurs in the area would do well to keep in mind that for an area like ours, their customer base is by and large comprised of their peers.

“They’re professional people, many of them are entrepreneurs themselves,” says Jordan. “They like high-quality, unique, luxurious, exclusive products. That’s exactly what we give them.” —*Jake Jarvi*

The Initial Choice

226 E. Westminster Avenue, Lake Forest

Sarah Lambrecht has owned The Initial Choice since 1984 and believes that business owners shouldn't undervalue the experience and expertise they bring to the table. "Our customers rely on us to give them good advice," Sarah says. "This only happens when you're a presence in your store and you have a relationship with your customers."

Sarah has also found success in offering products not available anywhere else locally, and she does so with a simple strategy. "**Sell what you would like to buy,**" she says. —*Ann Marie Scheidler*

Lake Forest Book Store

680 N. Western Avenue, Lake Forest

Lake Forest Book Store captured Sue Boucher's heart 18 years ago. "The book store seemed to have a life all its own—attracting some of the most wonderful people I had ever met. They were intelligent readers, curious about everything, and loyal to the book store and to their town," Sue says.

Lake Forest Book Store was started in 1949 by a group of women who decided that the town needed a book store. There were two owners after that, and then Sue and Louise Wood bought the store in 1995. Louise retired five years later. The store was located in the Caribou Coffee space for 54 years before it moved to Market Square nearly nine years ago.

To say it's challenging to be an independent book store in an era of Internet shopping and handheld devices would be a slight understatement. "The key for us has been to stay in tune with the community and its needs," Sue says. "We always aim to reflect the community in the books that are stocked in our store. By creating partnerships with local organizations, we've been able to attract authors to our store and introduce them to our customers here in Lake Forest, as well as other communities in Lake County," she says.

At the end of the day, according to Sue, a successful business is rooted in what you love. "**Sell what you're passionate about. Then get involved, join the Chamber, partner with other stores, and share ideas.**" —*Ann Marie Scheidler*

Kiddles Sports

258 E. Market Square, Lake Forest

If you have a sport equipment need and you live locally, there's only one place to have it met—at Kiddles Sports.

As the business has grown, Kiddles Sports owner Jay Shlifka has considered opening a second store in another community. But his commitment to his local customers has always held him back. "The atmosphere in Lake Forest is like no other. **Our customer base is kind, thoughtful, friendly, educated, engaging, fair-minded, and always gracious.** When the doors open daily, only our friends enter. Our business model allows us to stay in one location so we can properly maintain what our Lake Forest and Lake Bluff friends need daily to remain fit, healthy, and enjoy their respective sports-minded lifestyles," Jay says. Today, Jay's sons, Aric and Lee, help him run the business.

At Kiddles Sports, customer service isn't just a catchy phrase—it's a way of life. "We always read, study, and scour the sports environment for the perfect product mix for our customers. We continually change so that we're ahead of the curve with the newest trends, only accepting the highest quality brands," Jay explains. "We will never stop striving to be perfect in this regard." —*Ann Marie Scheidler*

The Lake Forest Shop

265 E. Market Square, Lake Forest

Ellen Stirling's grandmother, socialite Margaret Baxter Foster, opened The Lake Forest Shop in 1922. According to Ellen's father, her grandmother had quite a fondness for shopping. "She would buy closets of clothes at a time. In one lively discussion, my grandfather suggested she clean out her closets and open a store," Ellen says. "Now I don't know if she actually took clothes from her closet and sold them, but knowing the character that she was, she very well may have," says Ellen with a laugh. Ellen took over the reins of the store in the '80s.

"I wish I had known how much work it was going to be," reflected Ellen last fall when The Lake Forest Shop reached its 90th anniversary. "But I think my grandmother would be very proud at what she would see if she walked into The Lake Forest Shop today."

Probably more than anyone else, Ellen has had a front seat to the changing landscape of Market Square over the last several decades. "It's important for any new business to do a detailed market analysis," says Ellen. "Who's the competition? What are the barriers to entry? Who will pay for what you have to offer?"

But the most important advice Ellen imparts to those opening local businesses is to know your customer. "**We're always looking for ways to recreate and reinvent ourselves, while staying true to who our client is today and will be tomorrow,**" Ellen says, having completely remodeled her store in the last year while introducing new designers. "And a hug now and then doesn't hurt either." —*Ann Marie Scheidler*

Lake Forest Sportscars

990 North Shore Drive, Lake Bluff

Rick Mancuso opened Lake Forest Sportscars as a Ferrari dealership in Lake Forest in 1981. Now, 32 years later, his 70,000-square-foot facility in Lake Bluff houses a who's who of the top luxury sportscars: Ferrari, Maserati, Aston Martin, Lotus, and McLaren.

"It equates to the same neighborhood because as much as we call it two communities, it's really one bigger community," says Rick. "I live in Lake Forest and I didn't think anything could be better than living here and working here."

It's no surprise that Rick chose cars as his career. His grandfather opened an automotive showroom in Batavia, New York, in 1923. His father was responsible for opening Mancuso Chevrolet in Skokie in the '50s. It just seemed natural that Rick inherited an entrepreneurial spirit founded on horsepower. But he credits the longevity of Lake Forest Sportscars to the franchises he's chosen.

“Our product is really outstanding, as are our clients; it’s a nice combination,” says Rick. “Our cars are aspirational for all ages. A Ferrari is way more than a car; it’s a goal. It may be a lifelong goal for some people. I have 80-year-old guys come in here saying, ‘It’s time.’”

But he reminds us that even with a product people want, in a community like ours, any aspiring business owner needs to stay connected to the community.

“They have to be available, visible, and involved, not only in the business, but in the community as well,” says Rick. “It’s not just business and it’s not just personal, it’s a combination. This is a great area to do business.” —*Jake Jarvi*

Lovells of Lake Forest

915 S. Waukegan Road, Lake Forest

Jay Lovell and his father, Jim, enjoy Lake Forest so much that they put the city in the name of their restaurant. “Once I went to my Dad and said, ‘Let’s open a restaurant,’ we knew it would be in Lake Forest,” says Jay, Executive Chef and owner of Lovells of Lake Forest on Waukegan Road.

Since the restaurant debuted in 1999, the younger Lovell says the place has evolved from its fine dining roots. “We moved to more of a steakhouse concept and Southern home cooking,” he notes. “We have barbecued pulled pork and gumbo downstairs. We bring seafood from around the world here.

“We’ve evolved hopefully to what the public wants. You’re not going to see foie gras anymore because people don’t want it. **Basically, give customers good food and a good stiff drink, and they will come back.**”

Lovell does admit that if he had to do it over, the building—which houses some of his father’s memorabilia from his days as an astronaut—would be smaller. “It’s a big building, and it takes a lot of upkeep to keep it going,” he says.

For new business owners in downtown Lake Forest, Lovell wants them to understand that out-of-town customers will not be their main clients. “Lake Forest is a bedroom community—you don’t have the traffic flow other towns have in downtown,” he says. “Where I am [on Waukegan Road], I have traffic flow, and that helps out a lot.” —*David Sweet*

Voila!

53 E. Scranton Avenue, Lake Bluff

Susie McMurray opened Viola! in Lake Bluff in 2002 as the North Shore’s connection to authentic French antiques which she hand-picked in markets all over France. Once she partnered with Liz Moffitt Bermingham from Moonspun Gifts, incorporating greeting cards and gift items, the floodgates opened and Voila! expanded to what it is today. “We sell a lot of hostess gifts and a little bit of everything,” says Liz. “We’ve got everything from bras to chandeliers.”

As their growing customer base requested items from clothing to men's and children's gifts, they kept expanding what they offered until they truly became the store that Lake Bluff had asked for. They credit their longevity and loyal customer base to great service and their diverse and rarified selection.

"Word of mouth has been huge for us," says Susie. "We try to keep things unique. If someone likes something you got here and comes to get the same thing, we might not have it anymore. **We get little things you can't find other places.**"

Susie and Liz also credit Lake Bluff as having a devoted group of business owners. They were part of the formation of the Lake Bluff Downtown Merchants through the Chamber of Commerce. The group meets to plan downtown events together and keep all the area entrepreneurs connected.

After 10 years and going strong, Susie and Liz know the secret to keeping their business vital within our community. "You have to know your customer," says Susie. "And not overlap with what other places in town have to offer."

"And we'll wrap anything," adds Liz. —*Jake Jarvi*

Supporting Local Business

Local businesses go hand in hand with local banks, the Chamber of Commerce, and the city government. Here's what representatives from each institution had to say when asked to weigh in on the importance of local business to the community and how they support them.

"Local businesses are an important part of the fabric of the Lake Forest and Lake Bluff community. At Baytree, we feel it is important not only to provide traditional banking services to our local business clients, but also to serve as financial advisors for their business. As bankers, we patronize local businesses and refer clients and friends to them. It is important that the entire business community work together to support the local economy."

—**Susan Wright, President of the Community Bank, Baytree National Bank & Trust Company**

"Business start-ups have increased in the past four years in Lake Forest. The city attributes the trend to a changing, entrepreneurial climate, a business-friendly community, and streamlined city processes designed to grow local businesses. Lake Forest has a higher number than usual of heritage businesses such as Wenban, Kiddles Sports, The Lake Forest Shop, and others. We're convinced it's due to the community's traditional and strong support of local businesses." —**Susan Kelsey, Economic Development Coordinator, City of Lake Forest**

"We help local businesses by providing credit and deposit products that are specifically tailored to meet the unique needs of small businesses. Wintrust [Financial Corporation] has a partnership with SCORE to provide small business counseling and seminars to the small biz community. We provide SBA financing as well. The bank also hosts 'shop local' promotions to highlight local merchants. —**Maria Warden, Business Banker, Lake Forest Bank & Trust Company**

"Our institution serves the needs of wealthy individuals, established privately held businesses, and not-for-profit organizations with significant liquidity through investment management and banking services. In addition, we serve the needs of private equity firms by providing subscription lines of credit, partner loan

financing, and fund administration services.” —**Martha Hinchman, Managing Director, Northern Trust Lake Forest**

“Our communities are blessed to have beautiful downtowns in addition to lively retail areas on Waukegan Road in both Lake Forest and Lake Bluff. The historic charm, small-town atmosphere, and a wonderful mix of both independent stores and regional/national retailers is what makes our business community so special. In this day and age, specialists tell you that the most successful businesses are the biggest, the cheapest, or the best. It’s a high level of customer service and a focus on building relationships that make our businesses special—stores where people know your name. All are valuable amenities that make our towns wonderful places to live, work, and play.” —**Joanna Rolek, Executive Director, Lake Forest/Lake Bluff Chamber of Commerce**

Jolly Good Fellows



This month, Jolly Good Fellows is coming to Market Square. Opened by Lake Forest’s Laura Fellows, her meticulously conceived plans will come to life just in time for summer.

With two children in high school and one in middle school, Laura Fellows’ home has often been the place where the kids hang out. “But I’ve often wondered where the kids who don’t have a place like our house to come to—where do they go?” Laura asks. “I’ve often thought that was something that was lacking from our downtown—a place that was inviting to kids and their families and safe for them to be.”

So about three years ago, Laura put pen to paper and designed a business plan for a Willy Wonka-esque bakery that will sell cupcakes, cookies, frozen yogurt that is dog-friendly (that’s right, dogs are welcome, too!), retro candy, and a vast assortment of treats that are gluten- and peanut-free for children and adults with allergies.

“I’ve always loved to bake. It’s therapeutic for me and a way to connect with the kids,” she says. “I have lots of recipes that I’ve been working on and tweaking for years. But I’ve always loved cupcakes. Cupcakes just give people that happy feeling—everyone can remember a time when they had a cupcake that makes them

smile,” Laura says. In addition to having the traditional chocolate and vanilla cupcakes available daily, there will be six to eight other signature flavors that will rotate throughout the week.

As excited as Laura is about the products her bakery will sell, her enthusiasm about the design of her space is equally strong. “There will be a lollipop chandelier, a soda fountain where little ones can sit while their mothers watch them from a nearby table,” Laura says. “The booths will be equipped with outlets so that students can come here to study. We want everyone to feel at home.” — *Ann Marie Scheidler*

How to Launch a Local Business

Laura Fellows gave us an insider’s look at the steps she’s taken to open *Jolly Good Fellows*.

Research. Several years before *Jolly Good Fellows* became a reality, Laura visited bakeries similar to the one she hoped to open. “It was funny how I would pick up an idea here and there and just tuck it away,” she says.

Write a business plan. According to Laura, a solid business plan is critical to the success of *Jolly Good Fellows*. She spent more than a year developing it.

Find a location. This was everything to Laura. If it wasn’t in downtown Lake Forest, where the kids could walk to, she wasn’t interested. When the former Toy Station space became available on Market Square, Laura looked at it several times before signing a lease.

Talk with neighboring retailers. Laura has reached out to several other businesses on the Square so they understand her plans and what she hopes to accomplish.

Hire good people. One of the first people Laura brought on board was a pastry chef who has been perfecting recipes in Laura’s kitchen until the bakery is ready to open. “I know that I could do all of the baking, but I want to create a structure where if I can’t be at the bakery, or she can’t, that the bakery can still open that day and deliver what our customers are looking for,” Laura says.

Join the Chamber of Commerce. Long before the bakery opened, Laura became a regular fixture at Chamber of Commerce meetings. “The idea sharing and cross-promotional ideas with other businesses will bring so much to Market Square this summer.” One idea Laura is particularly excited about is an “adoption day” with the Placing Paws Animal Shelter in Libertyville.

Commit to your vision. Laura and her family know that the next year will be a challenging one as *Jolly Good Fellows* establishes itself in the community. “It’s going to be tough, but we’re ready,” says Laura.

Jolly Good Fellows is located at 270 Market Square in Lake Forest. For more information, call 847-861-2000.