

Economic change in rural Ontario

By Jody Didier

A recent provincewide study indicated that one in ten workers makes minimum wage and one-quarter of the work force earns less than \$15 per hour. This January, minimum wage will climb from \$11.40 to \$14, with another \$1 increase in January 2019.

Restaurateurs, grocers and retailers have warned that they may have to raise prices significantly, ultimately causing a jump in inflation. A lot of the talk is pretty gloomy.

While small business owners brace themselves for the impact of the upcoming increase, they are considering trends in the way we do business. In urban areas, larger merchants are expected to reduce scheduled hours, replacing workers with self-ordering kiosks and checkout systems.

There's plenty of chatter about an increase in online shopping as well. It has been growing in prominence these past years thanks to several factors including online-only special offers from [Raise](#), free shipping, and same-day delivery.

But let's not forget that mail order began in the mid 1800s and it wasn't all much different. Big department stores started popping up in the late 1880s as well. Yet small business owners managed to survive and thrive in several areas.

The first *Eaton's* catalogue was produced in 1884 and the last in 1976. The company made its second trip to bankruptcy court in 1997. Consumers Distributing operated via catalogue shopping from 1957 until its bankruptcy in 1996. The first Sears catalogue came out in 1894 and stopped producing them in the U.S. in 1993 and in Canada in the last quarter of 2016. The company began the liquidation process in July 2017.

Reaction to the collapse of Sears is an indication of consumer dissatisfaction with corporate greed and a desire to support entrepreneurs who seek wealth, rather than riches. Trending now, is a demand for small businesses that reflect responsible personal core values.

At one time, the heavyweight retailers like Zellers and Sears relied upon the customer browsing and selecting merchandise on their own. Online shopping was a natural spinoff, saving the consumer a trip to the store. Apparently, this is changing.

Today's customer prefers to work with an expert rather than the traditional salesperson and the businesses expected to thrive are those that build relationships with their customers, provide good, old-fashioned service and share their expertise - either through content marketing, or one-on-one sessions - rather than simply selling a product or service.

Some call this boutique-style business, but it's actually a throw back to the days when milliners sold hats, bakers sold pies and blacksmiths shod horses. Sounds like a lovely way of life.