



# Local Toy Shops Fighting, Winning Vs. Amazon

By JAMES COVERT

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Amazon has trained its sights on the toy business, but mom-and-pop stores are girded for the battle.

Shortly after Thanksgiving, the online retail giant kicked up controversy when it offered a mobile app that allowed shoppers to scan bar codes at stores and compare prices directly with its site.

In response, West Side Kids, a 30-year-old toy shop on the Upper West Side, slapped its windows with signs urging consumers to “shop local.”

“You love the Upper West Side? Then don’t shop in Seattle,” reads one sign, taking a dig at Amazon’s hometown.

“We had a lot of growth in the fourth quarter because of that,” says Jenny Bergman, who runs the shop with her mother, Alice.

MATTHEW MCDERMOTT

**’HOODIES:** West Side Kids store owners Alice (left) and Jenny Bergman are taking their shop-local campaign seriously with a “Don’t Shop in Seattle” sign on their Amsterdam Avenue shop.

“People come in and say, ‘Yeah, you’re right.’”

For the past decade, privately owned toy shops like West Side Kids have focused much of their energy battling big box giants like Walmart, Toys ‘R’ Us and Target. Now, the mom-and-pops say Amazon is their scariest foe.

“We’ve actually stopped carrying most of the bigger, bulky items because people would rather have them shipped to their house by Amazon,” Paul Nippes, owner of the Kidding Around toy shop, says of one Amazon-focused marketing strategy he now employs.

It might be working. Kidding Around opened its third location last fall in Grand Central Terminal. Growth comes with superior service and unique toys, according to Nippes.

The indie shops are getting a helping hand from toy manufacturers. New York-based Almar Sales Co., long a key supplier to big-box stores for novelty items such as Silly Bandz, values mom-and-pop stores for their feedback on new products.

“They’re the ones who watch the customers walk by your products, says Allen Ash, Almar’s president.

“They’ll say, ‘By the way, this item isn’t hanging correctly,’ or, ‘Maybe this should be in a brighter color, or you should offer combo sets.’”

“If you’re dealing with the big chains and one or two things don’t go right, all the legs fall off the chair,” says Rudy Valenta, owner of toy maker Valtech.

The Chicago-based firm’s Magna-Tiles — sleek, brightly colored magnets that can form 3-D sculptures — have been one of the hottest sellers at West Side Kids, despite the fact that a box of 100 sells for well over \$100, says Alice Bergman.

“They’re asking, ‘Would I want that in my living room?’” she said. “They don’t want anything that makes a lot of noise or has a computer chip, or is licensed from some movie or TV show.”

