

# Flexibility Matters Most

I am sitting on the modest patio of the Best Western Kokopelli Inn in Clayton, N.M. Now, I feel quite sure the majority of this column's readers have no idea where that is. It's halfway between Dumas, Texas, and Raton, N.M., about 160 miles northwest of Amarillo, Texas, sitting on U.S. Highway 287.

Not much has changed in Clayton from the middle to end of the 20th century and into the 21st. Its primary purpose is to serve as the support town to the larger surrounding agricultural area. Problems include antelope eating pasture, poisonous snakes biting animals, and mountain lions eating livestock. The population for the past 40 years has been 5,000.

But now, economic advancement has arrived. A new criminal detention center will open this summer; the highway is being significantly expanded and improved, a new accredited criminal justice community college is being created; and multiple distribution and technology enterprises are relocating to the area.

Why does all this matter? Because it is rather indicative of many similar economic activities that are being experienced within smaller communities just like Clayton throughout this country: programs developed by government and private entities, and various combinations thereof. Our company has become involved with such communities as they try to take a proactive role in identifying what specific retail strategies should be employed to meet the needs of a very different next-generation population base. What must be added to the community to ensure the "new" population will have its needs satisfied while not being remiss in continuing to serve the multigenerational native population?



**Jim Fisher** is the founder and CEO of Houston-based IMST Corp., a retail location analysis firm serving the convenience store/petroleum industries. He can be reached at [jfisher@imstcorp.com](mailto:jfisher@imstcorp.com).



## Growing Pains

A short while ago, a very similar opportunity presented itself to a small rural Midwest town chosen as the host community of a huge distribution center for a national online company. It required that several hundred employees be hired and about the same amount relocated from both coasts of the country. The town had to restructure itself in terms of preparing to serve a new "citizen style," one originating from New York and southern California. How does the community identify what must be brought to meet the new standards that will be required, while at the same time identifying those companies that want to participate in such a dynamic opportunity? It is a story that is happening right now in our country.

As a retailer, how do you respond to the community when you learn that it is about to be the beneficiary of a \$6-billion energy-related contract? Not a possibility, a fact! Framed another way, are you ready and able to adapt to changes in your marketplace, whether it means creating an entirely new offer or subtracting from what you're already doing?

National retailers within all sectors are making that "shift in size." Chili's, Applebee's and Ruby Tuesday's have all developed outstate/rural formats, which can be very successfully taken to communities with smaller populations and different demographic characteristics. Wal-Mart is returning to its roots with smaller stores and is joined by Target, Lowe's, The Home Depot, and all the other big-box offerings that have successfully homogenized this land.

Understanding and grasping *local knowledge* is the most important part of the successful formula that must be applied in today's marketplace. Limitation of corporate scope will negatively restrict what a retail company can be, and the role it can achieve in each marketplace. The independent retailer must be flexible and versatile in helping each community achieve meet the needs of its specific population, ever-changing as it might be.

By the way, book your reservations early at the Kokopelli Inn—fills up fast. ■