Small business big at On Main/Off Main

For the owners of On Main/Off Main, it's all about the customer service.

And it's "extraordinary customer service," said Bill Davis, co-owner of the alternative card shop, that has kept their customers coming back year after year.

He and business partner Oscar Camacho have co-owned the small retail store since 1983.

First, the shop was called On Main because it was situated on North Main Avenue in the Monte Vista/Laurel Heights area.

Four years later, they opened a candy shop called The Sweet Life right next door. In 2003, they condensed the two operations into one store and moved around the corner onto 120 W. Mistletoe Ave.

They didn't want to change the name of On Main for fear of confusing and losing their customer base.

But since they were no longer on Main Avenue, the name seemed inappropriate.

After a bottle of wine with friends, they had a brainstorm, and On Main/Off Main was hatched its new name.

And from their attentiveness to each customer, it's clear why they would be missed.

The businessmen pride themselves on remembering the names of their regulars and offering samples of all the treats they sell in the store.

If a customer says, "What does that taste like?" we'll say, 'Just a minute, I'll open up a box,'" Davis said. "You don't see the larger stores doing that."

There have been occasions in which a customer has called at 5:30 p.m. on the way to a birthday party and desperately in need of a gift.

"They'll say they need a tote bag with balloons on it, and we'll have it ready when they get here," Davis said.

After shopping in big-box stores so often, "Sometimes people forget what customer service is about," he added.

The owners handpick about 80 percent of the store's greeting cards, which are the most popular items.

Next, though, are the hand-dipped truffles. You'll also find books, candles, gag gifts and even a special back room that offers a selection appropriate for bachelorette parties.

"We've been listening to what our customers want," Davis said. "We learned a lot of things in 28 years."

Davis and Camacho have even served celebrities.

After taking actress Carol Burnett for enchiladas at Los Barrios one time, they presented her with a "Winter in Texas" sweatshirt, which they say, she still owns.

They're bringing the design back this year, along with another popular print that they designed themselves.

A local businessman prints the shirts for the store. Investing local, Davis said, is crucial to keeping these types of businesses alive.

"Our slogan is 'Keep it local'," Davis said. "And they do. Recently they held a contest to guess the weight of an enormous pumpkin in the store. The three prizes were gift cards to their store and two nearby businesses.

And if you'd like to shop online this Christmas, the owners suggest heading over to On Main/Off Main's Facebook page, where they post photographs of merchandise and list upcoming events.

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― Bill Davis, On Main/Off Main co-owner

Customers are not only Facebook friends, though; they're friends in real life.

"Special customers bring back their grown children, and they recall favors from years past, like the peppermint bark that we still sell," Camacho said.

They have discontinued some items over the years. When the store moved, the owners decided to stop selling coffee. That is, until their customers started complaining.

The special blends, some of which they named after regulars, were impossible to find elsewhere.

"We had to retrieve the coffee grinder from the storeroom," Davis said.

"It's that sort of dedication that has helped Davis and Camacho keep up the hard work of retail.

"If you're not willing to commit, you're not going to be successful," Davis said.

His best advice for a small-business owner: "Be true to yourself. And treat your customer how you'd want to be treated in a store."