

SMALL BUSINESS

Enterprise / By Tara Siegel Bernard

Big Help for Small Businesses at the Library

Commercial Databases, Assistance on Research And Classes Are Offered

WHERE CAN ENTREPRENEURS find office space, a research assistant, mentors and access to reams of market research—all free of charge?

They might try the local library. In an age where Google has become a verb and entrepreneurs have easy access to information from their home computers, libraries have been trying to evolve as well. Some have seemingly become small-business incubators in their own right: places where cash-strapped startups and established business owners alike can gather sophisticated information on a target market, draw up a business plan, bounce an idea off a seasoned executive, or perhaps, even find funding or build a Web site.

"When you think about Google, the term that is used in library circles, is the 'good enough' search," says David Hanson, business and specialty reference services coordinator with the Johnson County Library in Overland Park, Kan. "But when you are putting together a business plan," he says, "you need demographic information or marketing information, and it matters where you get your information. Good enough isn't good enough for you. That's where libraries can help."

Denise Upham Mills, an entrepreneur who keeps her local Johnson County Library on speed dial, camped out there for nearly eight months while crafting a business plan.

She was convinced there was a need for a rural high-speed Internet service—it was 1999, still the early days in terms of the high-speed Web—but didn't know the first thing about broadband. So, with the business librarians' help, she and her partners tapped databases

and other resources for statistical data, demographics of Midwestern cities, and articles on trends in the telecommunications industry.

"The librarians there became our market-research department," says Ms. Upham Mills. "They became part of our unpaid staff and truly were invaluable. We wrote a business plan that was so complete and detailed that it impressed people that look at business plans all day long. That data was [all culled at] the library. And we paid zero for it."

A small investment-banking firm found investors for them, and, in 2001, they sold the company, Invisiband, for a "comfortable sum," she says. After closing the deal, she and her partners met in the library parking lot to celebrate.

While resources will vary across institutions, most libraries subscribe to a number of commercial databases, which can cost thousands of dollars a year. For instance, ReferenceUSA, a database with information on millions of businesses and households, coupled with census data and a lifestyle database, can make a powerful market-research tool.

Entrepreneurs can find, for example, how many pet stores are in Brooklyn, N.Y., where they're located, residents' income levels, and whether they tend to own dogs.

One entrepreneur, who created a motorcycle-detailing kit, used a database of manufacturers to find motorcycle dealerships he wanted to target; then, he looked up their credit ratings, and created a mailing list targeting only those with the best scores.

"Putting that kind of information together can help people make more knowledgeable decisions," says Susan Phyllis, director of the Brooklyn Public Library's Business Library.

Library patrons also have remote access to materials—including a limited number of databases—from their library Web sites. In fact, many list links to other sites and directories they have vetted and found particularly useful.

Many libraries are trying to attract entrepreneurs by adding classes and networking opportunities geared to the small-business person, as well as partnering with more local economic-development agencies and organizations like Score, a volunteer group of retired executives that meet with and counsel entrepreneurs. In fact, some Score executives also offer seminars, such as how to use QuickBooks, or the basics on franchising, adds Leslie Burger, president of the American Library Association.

A few years back, George Constanti-

nou, then an aspiring restaurateur, attended the Brooklyn Business Library's entrepreneurial fair and learned about the library's annual business-plan competition. Sponsored by Citigroup Foundation, entrants attend classes on topics like creating a business plan, budgeting and marketing and then submit a plan. In late 2003, Mr. Constantinou and his partner, Farid Ali, who spent hours at the library mining databases, took home the top prize: \$10,000 in cash and \$10,000 in services.

"It was a great experience for us," says Mr. Constantinou, whose Brooklyn restaurant, Bogota Latin Bistro, is flourishing. "The library was really a one-stop shop for me to do research and write my business plan."

Since opening its doors 10 years ago, the Science, Industry and Business Library, or SIBL, part of the New York Public Library in Manhattan (nypl.org), says it has trained 64,000 people through its 20 free classes, where topics range from patents and trademarks to creating customized lists.

"Increasingly, what [libraries are] doing...is not only putting people in touch with information on the Web or information that is in books, but they're bringing experts to talk face-to-face with people," says Kristin McDonough, director of SIBL.

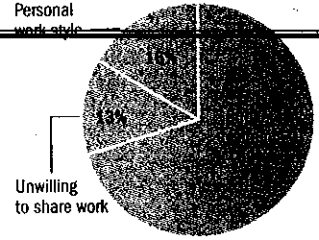
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By the Numbers / Going It Alone

What are the primary challenges as owner of a sole proprietorship?

Why not hire an additional employee?

- Finding time to generate new business 27%
- Being stretched over multiple roles/projects 27
- Can't focus on passions about the business 23
- Limited resources 23
- Business inefficiency 23



Sources: Visa USA; SCORE

Note: Percentages don't total 100% due to independent rounding

On Sole Proprietor Wish List: Time to Build Firms

For sole proprietors, finding the time to build the firm is one of the biggest challenges.

More than a third of owners (35%) of one-person firms say that the toughest part is their inability to focus on generating more business, according to a survey by Score, a nonprofit group of entrepreneurial counselors, and Visa USA.

And 27% of the owners in the poll say that stretching themselves across multiple work roles and projects is what they find the most difficult in their nonemployee businesses.

Of the 1,000 owners polled, 52% say that with the help of an additional worker, finding new business would become a personal priority, while 32% say they would

also spend more time evaluating and addressing the areas where their businesses needed the most improvement, and 26% say they would take up the activities they are most passionate about.

With an additional employee, 28% of the sole proprietors say they would delegate sales to the extra help, 25%, operations, but only 5% would use another worker for financial matters.

If extra help could be so useful, why not hire another employee? The large majority, 69%, say their businesses can't afford an additional worker. But 16% say their own personality won't allow it, and 13% say that they are unwilling to share the workload of their business.

—Richard Breeden

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