

LIBRARIES BUILD BUSINESS



Sustaining Small Businesses and Entrepreneurs During the Pandemic and Beyond

As the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted business as usual, small business owners and entrepreneurs have been faced with the challenge of pivoting their business models to respond to health and safety guidelines, social distancing, and a changed business landscape. Public libraries—with nearly 17,000 locations across the United States—have modified their services as well to aid business owners and entrepreneurs in this complex and changing environment. As the economic recovery unfolds, libraries serve as a critical national infrastructure, helping business owners and entrepreneurs to navigate the uncertain territory ahead.

Libraries power business development

Thousands of libraries—from Maine to Mississippi to Washington—provide services and resources for small business owners and entrepreneurs. This includes:

- partnering with business development organizations such as SCORE, local chambers of commerce, or innovation incubators to offer workshops on business development;
- hosting professional development and networking events for business owners;
- guiding entrepreneurs to sources of financing and assistance;
- responding to market research and intellectual property inquiries;
- providing workspace and co-working spaces;
- offering access to technology and relevant digital skills and social media training; and
- providing 3D printers for prototyping.

Pivoting to respond to the pandemic

In 2020 pandemic-related measures rapidly changed the business environment—resulting in reduced foot traffic or closures, pressure to move services online, an impetus to adapt low- or no-contact business models, a need to keep up with evolving public health guidelines and aid programs, and concerns over meeting payroll and covering fixed business expenses. Libraries responded swiftly to similar constraints, developing virtual and curbside services for their community members, including businesses. In Providence, Rhode Island, for example,



Business workshops and networking events are held virtually during the pandemic

TAKEAWAYS for decision makers and potential partners

- 👥 **Libraries across the nation support local business development**, providing access to resources, virtual and physical workspace, start-up guidance, digital skills training, and more.
- 📈 **Libraries are well-positioned** to aid small business owners and entrepreneurs as they pivot to successfully meet pandemic and post-pandemic market conditions.
- 🏠 **Libraries are cost-effective and efficient partners** that should be included in initiatives to boost small business recovery.

the Providence Public Library has moved its ESL classes and business workshops online, including a Patents and Trademarks workshop. They have found that business inquiries have increased during the pandemic and are preparing their services to help businesses recover. In Spokane County, Washington, the Spokane County Library District has offered hotspots to rural business owners who lack reliable access. They are running a series of virtual workshops using a cohort model to support peer learning and feedback.

A September 2020 survey conducted by ALA of nearly 50 libraries engaged in small business work across 14 states revealed that most businesses seeking their help during the pandemic were in food and accommodations, retail trade, educational services, and arts and entertainment—precisely the sectors most affected by social distancing measures. Most of these libraries also reported collaborating with other community organizations, such as chambers of commerce, colleges and universities, SCORE, Small Business Development Centers, and nonprofits to aid businesses.

Inspiring entrepreneurs virtually

Despite the challenges it brings, the COVID-19 pandemic has also been an opportunity for innovation and a vehicle for change. With everyone doing

“Due to our closure we lost patron foot traffic, which was always a help in drawing in participants. We started advertising more heavily online, including to local arts organizations. Since the pandemic, we lost participation in areas that were more successful in the face-to-face world—patents and intellectual property—but we’ve hit new target audiences we hadn’t before, namely creatives such as artists and musicians.”

—Christopher Bourret,
Providence Public Library

everything—school, work, business, entertainment—differently, and all industries and routines disrupted, new needs and markets have emerged, as well as opportunities to reimagine infrastructure, values, culture, and daily life. In this context libraries have continued to offer support specifically for entrepreneurs.

The Baltimore County Public Library in Maryland, for one, has pivoted to offer its Entrepreneur Academy program virtually. The program offers weekly workshops online led by the Small Business Development Center of Maryland and the CASH Campaign of Maryland. To account for the

relationship-building that usually happens in in-person spaces, the library also offers virtual co-learning opportunities each week for peer-learning and time to connect with the librarians about specific resources and services. This tailored approach allows budding entrepreneurs opportunity for networking and connections. Similarly, in Columbia, South Carolina, the Richland Library moved its Entrepreneurial Launchpad program online and has continued to proactively support the local business community during the pandemic. Among other things, the library has developed a responsive online interface to guide community members to relevant employment and small business help in the face of COVID-19. The library is also offering Zoom sessions with local business experts and checking out equipment and materials through their Library of Things.

LIBRARIES can provide business owners with:

- Clear guidance** on when and how to re-open
- Sources of financial support** to cover fixed costs
- Training** to shift from operating in-person to online
- Access to computers** capable of video conferencing
- Access to high-speed internet** with sufficient bandwidth for video
- Resources to pivot** and adapt to the pandemic environment
- Guidance on developing ideas** for new ventures
- Coaching** and mentoring by business experts
- Online classes** on entrepreneurship
- Peer learning** and networking opportunities



A pre-pandemic meeting of Baltimore County Public Library's Entrepreneur Academy