



25 Ways Your Library Can Support the Small Business Community

Public libraries of all sizes can provide support to the entrepreneurs in their community. Here are 25 suggestions for offering that support:

1. Offer library space for business meetings, workshops and community programs.

If your meeting room policy does not allow for-profit groups to use the facilities, change it! You can always charge a fee to cover your costs.

2. Sponsor business workshops in your library.

The key word here is “sponsor.” You don’t have to create the programs, you can invite experts who already provide business services in your community to give workshops. Topics might include starting a business, hiring employees, developing a business plan, or getting financial assistance for their business. Just make sure the publicity lists the library as a *sponsor* of the event.

3. Include a business link on your library’s home page.

Don’t hide your business resources under some heading like “databases,” “research,” “online resources,” or “adult services.” Make it very clear how an entrepreneur can get directly to the business resources they need.

4. Build a basic business collection.

Include books on how to start various kinds of businesses (there are several sets of these), as well as books on topics such marketing, finance, and protecting intellectual property. Ask business owners for topics they would like to see in your collection, and keep track of reference questions that point to the need for additional resources.

5. Provide essential business reference databases.

Typical business owners don't have the time to visit the library in person, but are sometimes willing to do their own research online. Make sure they have remote access to the library's relevant business databases. Probably the two most valuable ones for local entrepreneurs are ReferenceUSA and DemographicsNOW. If you don't have the budget to purchase these resources or make them available remotely, see if a business group is willing to kick in some money. Once they understand the power of the databases, they are often willing to help obtain them.

6. Train library staff to identify and answer basic business reference questions.

Many public library staff members are intimidated by the thought of answering business reference questions. In fact, it's not rocket science, and as we saw above, the information needs of entrepreneurs typically fall into the same four categories. Anyone who is good at reference can learn the basics of business research.

7. Post "entrepreneur friendly" signs in your library

It costs nothing to put a sign at the entrance that says "Entrepreneur-Friendly Library," or "Business-Friendly Library." Then make sure entrepreneurs know where to go to get the help they need, and that your library is capable of providing it.

8. Provide workforce and career resources

Particularly in a down economy, libraries become de facto career and workforce centers. They are challenged to meet the needs of people who are looking for jobs or wanting to change careers. The best strategy is to partner with other agencies that can or do provide support to these workers. The library can sponsor workshops or training sessions on how to write a resume, fill out an online application, or find job openings. A local SCORE chapter could be recruited to review people's resumes or offer career advice to job seekers.

9. Create or host networking opportunities for entrepreneurs

This can be done in conjunction with your local chamber of commerce or professional business association. It can be a breakfast event with food provided by a local sponsor, or an after-hours group that meets regularly at the library.

10. Support community entrepreneurship groups or inventors clubs

There is likely to be at least one group like this that is already in the community. Offer a place for them to hold their meetings. Or, you can find a champion in the community who wants to start a group and help get the word out.

11. Create opportunities for business students and young entrepreneurs

Start an entrepreneurship club for kids or young adults or sponsor a business plan contest in conjunction with a partner like a local university or service club.

12. Partner with business service providers to host “lunch and learn” sessions

Like the workshops listed above, the library can bring in content providers from outside groups. Library staff can also demonstrate business resources the library owns that can meet business owners’ needs.

13. Provide an “entrepreneur-readiness” checklist

You don’t have to create this resource yourself; there are plenty of them out on the web or available through local service providers. The idea is to provide aspiring entrepreneurs with an easy way to assess whether or not they have what it takes to be a business owner.

14. Offer free Wi-Fi in the library

Particularly in smaller communities, there may not be many free Wi-Fi hotspots. Some libraries in rural areas have reported people camping out in the library parking lot with lawn chairs and laptops during times the library is not open!

15. Create a home-based business “office” space

More than 50 percent of all businesses in the U.S. are home-based. If you don't have a separate room, you can create a corner within the library that is “business friendly” and includes copy, fax, and laptop stations; a computer that offers access to the library's catalog and business databases; and links to useful web-based resources.

16. Develop a resource guide for new businesses (or share an existing one)

Whether you provide this resource guide online or as a printed handout, aspiring business owners appreciate having information about what steps they need to take to establish their business. This should include information about how get registered in various jurisdictions, obtain a sales tax license, and learn about appropriate government regulations. It can also include sources of help and technical assistance available to them.

17. Create community fact sheets

Address common requests for community demographics and business statistics by providing a regional profile. Compile lists of popular marketing targets, for example, churches, schools, and medical facilities. Create lists of small business service professionals in your community such as lawyers, accountants, financial advisors, printers, insurance agents, realtors, etc.

18. Create targeted business products such as industry reports and overviews

Develop a template and create “packaged” reports on industries commonly requested by small business owners, e.g., pets, alternative health care, construction and home repair services. These could include lists of current local businesses within that sector, demographics or profiles of potential local customers, and industry trends.

19. Develop or link to a list of websites that answer business questions

Many libraries and other business service providers have already done this work for you, and you can link to their efforts. One website worthy of mention is www.score.org, which leverages the expertise of SCORE members across the U.S. to

provide answers to technical business questions that are submitted through their website.

20. Send marketing information to newly registered businesses

You can usually get a list of businesses that have applied for a business or sales tax license from city or county offices. You can also check with chambers of commerce or other service providers to see what new businesses they know about. Send them a welcome to the community postcard that invites them to come to the library and lists relevant resources. Better yet, pay them a visit!

21. Offer business appointments with reference librarians by phone, e-mail and the web

You can create an online form to accomplish this purpose. Denver Public Library uses such a form on their “BizBoost: Free Small Business Help” website, http://denverlibrary.org/news/dplnews/business_research.html.

22. Offer literacy/second language classes

You can partner with other organizations such as churches, social service agencies, and community colleges to offer classes for immigrants and others who need to develop literacy and English language skills. One benefit to the business community is access to a more literate workforce. It is also a fact that immigrants have higher rates of entrepreneurship than people born in this country. These entrepreneurs will have an advantage in their business if they have good English-language skills.

23. Send a “librarian with a laptop” into the business community

Some libraries have sent staff members out to local small businesses to gather information about their needs and answer questions they may have. Libraries can learn what their business customers need, and business owners can “put a face with a name” and learn what the library has to offer.

24. Attend local business meetings and serve on committees

An Illinois Institute of Rural Affairs study in 1998, *Enhancing Economic Development Through Libraries*, recommends that public librarians spend at least ten percent of their time outside the library in order to establish effective business relationships. There is no substitute for connecting with your target audience face-to-face!

25. Herald your successes!

Collect testimonials and stories from the business owners or workers you've helped and share them. Get permission to put these on your website and give them to media outlets. A good story is worth a thousand statistics!