

Thriving in Battle Creek: Tools and Strategies for Small Business Success

A Project 20/20 Leadership Meeting

January 26, 2011

Burnham Brook, 7:30 a.m.



Welcome and Opening Comments

Talia Champlin opened the meeting with introductions and an overview of the meeting agenda. The topic for the meeting was supporting small businesses and title was “Thriving in Battle Creek: Tools and Strategies for Small Business Success”. Talia reminded attendees that Project 20/20 facilitates these important conversations among leaders and community members to move Battle Creek toward excellence. The meeting presenters are the individuals doing the work and need our support. Talia then introduced Cheryl Peters of the Center for Entrepreneurship.

Cheryl Peters, Tyler Upston and Jeff Samson

Cheryl Peters gave an overview of the services provided by 14 organizations through the Center for Entrepreneurship (CfE). The CfE is located on the campus of Miller College (at Kellogg Community College) and has one part-time staff member. The CfE acts as a clearinghouse for entrepreneurs that want to start or expand their businesses. It offers meeting space, access to service providers (accountants, attorneys, etc.), referrals to coaches/mentors and training facilities. Depending upon the type of services needed by the entrepreneur, the CfE refers clients to one or more of the CfE partner organizations. The organizations that form the CfE are: Albion Economic Development Corporation, Battle Creek Area Chamber Foundation, Battle Creek Community Foundation, Battle Creek Unlimited, Generation E Institute, Kellogg Community College, Marshall Area Chamber of Commerce, Marshall Economic Development, Marshall Main Street, Barry/Branch/Calhoun Michigan Works!, Michigan Small Business & Technology Development Center, The Robert B. Miller College, Nonprofit Alliance and SCORE. For more information, visit the CfE’s website at www.cfcscm.org or call 269.966.4095.

Tyler Upston from Upston’s Lawn and Garden, LLC shared his story with members about how he started his business 10 years ago. He also discussed best practices that have worked for his business. It’s important that small businesses support each other. He buys local supplies whenever possible and recommends other businesses do the same. Approximately 75% of his business comes from word of mouth advertising. He utilizes Facebook as a website and marketing tool and recommends all businesses take advantage of it.

Jeff Samson from Malia Mediterranean Bistro talked about his experience as a business owner and shared insights on opening a business. He attributed his success largely to the support of the community and an excellent staff. His decision to open a business was due to the changes happening downtown and because the timing was right. There are numerous challenges to launching a business. It is difficult to get financing, write a business plan and to put everything you know and own on the line. However, there is support for entrepreneurs to help them through the challenges. Entrepreneurs must realize that nothing will get handed to them. Business owners have to work very hard and take risks. Otherwise, their businesses will never work the right way or it won’t last long.

Group Discussion and Input

Following the presentation, members were asked to participate in a small group discussion. The following three questions were posed: **What strategies and tools can for-profit and non-profit entities use to thrive and survive? What businesses would you support in our community? What challenges are you facing to expand your business or hire new employees?**

An individual from each discussion table shared two key points with the group. All additional ideas are located at the end of this document.

Key Points Reported by Each Group

What strategies and tools can for-profit and non-profit entities use to thrive and survive?

- Making things (help and resources) available other than “normal” working hours
- Utilize focus groups which will help you know customer perceptions
- Understand your environment, planning goals as well as where you’re going to utilize resources
- Excellent and continual customer service
- Social networking
- Review business plan annually (SCORE, BCU, BC Chamber, CfE, ACE – A²)

What businesses would you support in our community?

- Specialty, variety and unique
- Unique/specialty restaurants (Japanese/oriental, those geared toward young professionals i.e. BW3) and hard-to-find sports equipment stores (hockey, lacrosse, rugby, snowboarding)
- A general store/convenience store in the downtown
- Businesses that are based on social entrepreneurship
- Outstanding customer service and outstanding overall customer experience
- Have to draw people here and have a variety of shops/stores for them to stay

What challenges are you facing to expand your business or hire new employees?

- Finding mentors to facilitate needs
- A forum to connect with other inventors, venture capitalists and entrepreneurs
- Having a clear definite plan of action (target audience, action plan with nimbleness and clear definition of goal)
- Community’s retention problem, especially with younger people and enticing those who have left to return by establishing positive relationships while here
- Finding good employees
- Taxes are hurting small businesses

Closing Comments

Members were encouraged to attend the next Project 20/20 event on February 17 from 6:00 – 7:30 p.m. (different from normal day/time of community forums) at the Burnham Brook Community Center (200 W. Michigan Avenue in Battle Creek). The title for the community forum is “What Our Youth & Young Professionals REALLY Want”. A 2011 meeting schedule is available at www.bcproject2020.com.

Members were asked to complete a survey, make a donation, become a fan of Project 20/20 on Facebook or follow our tweets, visit the Project 20/20 website at www.bcproject2020.com and invite others to join us.

Additional Ideas from Small Group Discussion

What strategies and tools can for-profit and non-profit entities use to thrive and survive?

- A business plan and people to review it (SCORE, Chamber, Miller Staff)
- Education (finance, marketing, computer, social network sites, website)
- Visit like type businesses
- Training (focused) knowledge
- Real estate (lower cost) location
- Fill the voids
 - Supply/demand (consumer interest)
 - Adjust to the need/demands (input)
- Public/private ventures
 - Public need (proper marketing)
- Internet (social marketing)
- Retain profit for recession
- Game plan
- Know who you are, what you are in the market (branding)
- Friendly resources
- Labor and cost
- Commitment/invest
- Facebook – market/community awareness
- Website – WordPress, development site
- Blogging
- Public relations – more direct connection to clients i.e. press releases
- Market research/needs assessment
- Develop a support group to talk about business problems, opportunities, growth
- Business referral/leads groups

What businesses would you support in our community?

- Entertainment
 - Fine arts/culture
 - Volunteer run movie theatre?? (feasibility?)
- Gazelle Sports
- Military supplies
- Deli with pre-packaged take-out meals
- Adult beverage store with cheese, meat, deli products
- Gander Mountain
- Downtown restaurants for lunch crowd (ethnic – Thai)
- Services (shoe repair, computer, dry cleaners)
- Activities (rink, family themed) – facility that can be multi-purpose and profit generating
- Entertainment – place to hang out (theater, movies)

- Women fashion boutique (professional)
- Support them with awareness and buy local
- Small, local, personal relationships
- Willingness to pay for what we get
- Convenience – easy to find
- Parking
- Entertainment opportunities
- Reasons to spend time downtown
- Family oriented
- Arts
- Youth interests
- Blend of unique and standard

What challenges are you facing to expand your business or hire new employees?

- Regulations/enforcement – requirements have changed
- Finding qualified professionals locally
 - Health
 - Technology (start-up)
- As hire in – regulations, background, second chance
- As employer – staff starting up their own business, now moving business into home
- Expansion – pricing challenged by online comparison or out of town competition
- Built from design – now looking to hire, spent all disposable income on development, now faced with regulation and road blocks
- Support has not been present locally
- Collaborate with businesses that tie into individual business
- Absence of iconoclastic specialty retail/restaurant choices
- Understanding break-even point
- Difficulty establishing community within your business structure
- Absence of nimbleness
- Absence of clear definition of target audience
- Noise pollution relating to train noise at night and absence of availability of answers regarding this “hospitality” problem
- Negative perceptions of marketplace (real estate, small business)
- Negative perceptions of Battle Creek’s art scene
- De-emphasizing the negative/accentuate the positive
- Absence of diversity of “resources”
- Absence of clearinghouse for information re: Center for Entrepreneurship
- “Siloed” instead of interconnectedness/holistic
- Regulation
- Equipment
- Buying local
- Image