



## How One Entrepreneur is Using their Business to Build a More Inclusive Society

In Kansas City, a local library offers resources to help small businesses like Civic Saint, a lifestyle brand with a social justice focus.

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**Kansas City, MO** – Following the unjust killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery and the movements that sprung up in their wake, Kansas City native Godfrey Riddle saw an opportunity to do more to support social justice causes in the United States.

“I thought, why not harness for-profit proceeds to support nonprofits that advocate both at an institutional and grassroots level to create a more inclusive society that protects people who have been historically marginalized?” he said

In October 2020, he launched Civic Saint, a small business that sells affirming apparel and accessories. He donates the proceeds to nonprofit and grassroots initiatives focused on building a more inclusive society for people who have been historically marginalized.

Launching a business during the COVID-19 pandemic was risky but Riddle was determined to succeed. His determination helped him persevere even when challenges arose, for example difficulties with sourcing items, shipping delays, and a saturated market. Part of what helped him succeed was access to Mid-Continent Public Library’s (MCPL) Square One Small Business Services.

MCPL’s Square One Small Business Services program offers a comprehensive suite of online resources that are intended to help entrepreneurs learn basic skills that they need. This includes tools to help them build a cohesive business plan as well as tutorials to create reports and perform analyses. Also available are videos that teach people how to start specific kinds of ventures such as an event planning business, an Etsy shop, or a daycare. The library also provides access to online versions of various business and technology books and business publications. In addition, the library offers mentoring to help guide small business owners.

Riddle described the library’s support as invaluable for building his business. He has turned to the library for advice on several business activities such as building a social media presence for Civic Saint, developing a marketing strategy, understanding the market he was moving into as well, and identifying a market niche.

Access to the free library tools and resources are a boon for small businesses with limited resources. As someone new to starting a business, “I can’t even express how useful that is just to be able to save money [by] not having to buy all those books that could [either] be

great or a waste of my limited resources,” Riddle said. With the support of the library and Square One staff, “I feel more confident and knowledgeable.”

He further noted that securing capital has always been challenging for minority-owned businesses because of the entrenched systemic racism that has historically limited opportunities for Black business owners.

“Being a Black business owner, and a minority business owner, having the capital we need to scale is often the hardest part because we don’t have wealthy networks. [And] we don’t have personal wealth because we’ve been systematically locked out of generating that wealth through pay and generational income,” he said. Furthermore, “we still face institutionalized racism when we ... approach traditional lending sources. And the [Community Based Financial Institutions] that are available to us don’t have as much capital to lend even though they [have] very favorable terms. So, it’s just hard to grow.”

Riddle envisions Civic Saint eventually becoming much more than an apparel company. In fact, he hopes to foster measurable change in his community. “One of the things that benefits Civic Saint is its ethos and that it’s focused on building spaces of inclusion and equity,” he said. “So that means if at some point Civic Saint merged to being a real estate firm and helps to tackle issues of housing and equity, it can do that.”

He believes that Square One has been a useful partner in his journey to build Civic Saint. He feels strongly about the role of libraries in communities describing them as “the single greatest resources we have for closing the gap around equity.”

One resource that he and other entrepreneurs can use is the library’s DemographicsNow database which provides tools to analyze the demographic and market potential of any geography in the US, create custom reports, perform market analysis, and more. They can also reach out directly to library staff if they need help with using the tools effectively. “Their support [and] knowledge is really what I found to be most useful,” Riddle said. “And the fact that they have entrepreneurs on staff and entrepreneurial experts on staff is super useful.”

Riddle is continuing to expand Civic Saint including offering more products and adding new services to support on-demand packaging and shipping. He also now works with five retailers who carry his products including Made in Kansas City and Hallmark. He credits Square One business services with helping him with his pitch to Hallmark. However, he is still grappling with the saturated fashion market and hopes to use some of his profits to develop a gender-neutral capsule collection.

In addition to building infrastructure for his business, Riddle has used what he has learned from MCPL to create customer personas and use them to have a conversation with several potential partners including a local business hub. “Ultimately, I’d love to see Civic Saint grow into a multinational conglomerate of business services, leading the way to close the gaps and spaces where equity hasn’t been at the forefront... that prevent Black and Brown Americans and people all around the world from having a good quality of life,” he said.

Riddle is currently applying for some grant funding that will help him grow his business further. Moving forward, he said his biggest need for continued learning and training is in how to manage people and finances. He also suggested that the library send newsletters or emails that highlight specific business services.

Riddle’s advice for other budding entrepreneurs is to communicate openly about their intended journey so that they can get the help and support they need. In addition, he points them to the wealth of human resources and other services at MCPL. His experiences with Square One have changed his views on libraries. While he once viewed them as archaic, Riddle now sees them as an important resource for small business owners. Libraries are a “huge untapped resource,” he said. “Having engaged with Square One, I completely evangelize them. I’m a huge advocate for them now.”



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