



Mid-Continent Public Library Data Report

Rupu Gupta, Rebecca Norlander, & Uduak Grace Thomas

Introduction

The Mid-Continent Public Library (MCPL) is consolidated library district that serves nearly 800,000 people in the greater Kansas City metro area. The library has over 30 service outlets including local branches throughout the area. This Data Report summarizes Knology's analysis of interview with partner community organizations and share profiles of local entrepreneurs that have used MCPL's Square One Business Services program

Methods

Community Partner Interviews

Knology proposed conducting interviews and focus groups with community partners. These evaluation activities were designed to understand the library's role in the entrepreneurial ecosystem of a given community. Researchers asked libraries working with ULC to share the contact information of 2-3 community partners (ideally from different organizations) that they have collaborated with.

MCPL put Knology researchers in touch with four community partners. Three of these joined a single focus group and one participated in an individual interview. During these conversations, we asked them about their experience with entrepreneurial programs, their engagement with the libraries through this grant, how the library supports their organizational goals, and their perception of the library's role in the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The focus group and Interview were recorded and transcribed. A Knology researcher reviewed the transcripts and periodically returned to the recording to surface important themes as related to the evaluation questions listed above. Several quotes have been edited for clarity.

Participants

Participants had the option to have their comments reported on with or without attribution. All four interviewees working with MCPL gave permission to be identified by name. The participants were:

Gabe Muñoz works with MCPL's Square One Small Business Services team and with Forward Cities' ESHIP Communities Initiative, a Kauffman Foundation initiative to support entrepreneurs disconnected from the traditional business resource ecosystem.

Linda Zappulla has been a volunteer teacher and certified mentor with SCORE Kansas City for the past 8 years. SCORE's primary services are free one-on-one mentoring and workshops for small business owners.

Xander Winkel is with the Ennovation Center, an incubator that offers commercial kitchen space, offices, laboratories, and other non-food manufacturing spaces for people starting their own business, and staff to guide them through the process. Winkel works directly with the Square One program on several different business classes, primarily related to restaurants, food trucks, and other food products. The Ennovation Center's parent organization, the Independence Economic Development Council, works alongside MCPL's workforce development initiatives.

Kim Niebaum of CoffeeCakeKC Food Truck, which she calls "*an espresso bar on wheels,*" partners with other local businesses to supply various baked goods where they're needed. As a successful food truck owner and entrepreneur, she works closely with Winkel and the Square One team to mentor others thinking about starting their own food business.

Gold Star Interviews

Knology conducted in-depth case studies with Gold Star participants of entrepreneurial programs and services with those libraries who opted into this activity. For these case studies, we requested that MCPL nominate 2-3 participants who have demonstrated close engagement with the library's entrepreneurial programs and services and are able to reflect in detail about their experiences.

The Interview questions focused on participants' engagement with entrepreneurial programs and services and how the library helps support entrepreneurs' goals. To understand their entrepreneurial journey over time, we conducted semi-structured interviews with participants first in Spring 2021 and again in Fall 2021. Participants were compensated after they completed both interviews.

With permission, researchers recorded the interviews to assist with analysis only. Participants had two options: 1) to participate in the interview without having their name, company name, etc. included in the write up 2) to participate in the interview agreeing to have their name attached to select success stories or quotes.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed. A Knology researcher reviewed the transcript and periodically returned to the recording to surface important themes as related to the evaluation questions. Findings from the Follow up interview in the Fall were incorporated into the original analysis (after the interview in the Spring) for continuity so that it aligned with previous themes. Where appropriate, additional themes were added.

Participants

The library nominated five Gold Star participants for interviews. All participants consented to be named and to having profile pieces written about them and their work. In alphabetical order, these individuals were:

Eileen Bobowski, Executive Director of **The Sewing Labs**, a nonprofit that partners with nonprofits throughout Kansas City to help people achieve a life of financial stability, through the skilled trade of sewing

Darlene Deluca, an independent author who writes contemporary romance and women's fiction.

Daniel R. Hipsher Sr., founder of **Daniel's Bar-b-q Sauces L.L.C.** which manufactures and markets barbecue sauce

Cindy Newland, founder of **Functional Fitness**, a business that offers fitness and wellness programming to for-profit organizations, and **Intentionally Eat**, a blog that provides recipes and related products for people interested in plant-based diets.

Godfrey Riddle, founder of **Civic Saint**, a business that sells affirming apparel and accessories and uses its profits to advance social justice causes in the US.

Findings

Community Partner Interviews

Nature of Partnership with Library

The interviews revealed various dimensions to the relationship between MCPL and the four community partners.

The partnership between SCORE and the library provides *access to various resources and trainings* that are valuable for small business owners. Zappulla highlighted the extensive resources and tools available through the library, many of which she routinely recommends to SCORE's clients. For example, she recommends templates for various tasks that are available through the library's subscriptions and databases, such as one about how to structure a business plan. Additionally, SCORE and MCPL run joint workshops that cover foundational concepts for running a business including topics from finance and marketing. One workshop that they have offered together is called Simple Steps for Starting your Business.

Some partnerships focus on *support for specific kinds of businesses*. Through the library, Niebaum and Winkel teach an in-depth class for people who are thinking about starting a food truck business, which is different from opening a brick-and-mortar restaurant. The class aimed to help people understand what owning a food truck entails – including the potential pitfalls and challenges. The class was expanded to include another business partner of Niebaum's, who provides instruction about marketing and social media to the course agenda. As Niebaum noted during the interview,

"It's not as easy as people think. It's physically demanding, you have to know accounting, you have to know food health safety; there are just a lot of things people don't realize when starting a food truck. ... [N]ot only do you have to know the codes and health regulations of just one city, you need to know [them] for ... different cities because we are subject to all of them that we serve in."

Another way the library works with its community partners is through *referrals*. Zappulla said that SCORE often recommends library services or classes that may be helpful for small businesses. These resources cover things that entrepreneurs need to know such as the importance of doing the background research to understand their industry or target market before launching a business. For people interested in the food industry, they may recommend food business-focused classes, like the one taught by Winkel and Niebaum.

There are also opportunities to expand the partnership between SCORE and the library to *intentionally engage and empower* even more entrepreneurs. For example, Zappulla suggested identifying people through the SCORE or MCPL network who are skilled in specific trades such as hairdressing or construction and have them compile fact sheets about doing business.

During COVID-19, when it became impossible to run in-person entrepreneurship classes at the library, the partners shifted their programming online. Niebaum said that during the pandemic, she offered online one-on-one meetings with anyone who had business related questions.

“I have a master's in business, so they were able to ask me different questions. [For example], how do I set up my organization, ... do I need a business license, do I need an inspection ... [W]e would set up a one-hour class online, a zoom meeting, and ... [they] could ask me anything you possibly would want to know about your business and I would answer it to the best of my abilities.”

She also said that she liked this type of engagement because it is inherently customizable. The client or library patron picked the day and time that worked best for them. This was particularly helpful during COVID given the many different responsibilities people needed to juggle. If she were unable to answer a particular question, she would connect them with an MCPL staff member or send them information about additional resources. *“It's more tailored to them, so they feel more welcomed,”* she said.

The library and the community partners also *jointly offered online classes* during the pandemic. Niebaum noted that classes sizes were small at first but grew over time as people became comfortable with using virtual platforms. Winkel added that the library ensured that classes were available and accessible online.

Muñoz highlighted an *entrepreneur mentorship program* that his organization offers in collaboration with MCPL. They offered the program in-person prior to the pandemic. However, the library pivoted successfully to offering the program online and maintaining the support it provides to entrepreneurs.

Benefits to Entrepreneurs

Library-community organization partnerships have clear benefits for local entrepreneurs who have been left out of more traditional support systems including family with access to capital. According to Muñoz, the key to effective support for small business owners is creating *an accessible environment* for people who might be self-conscious, who feel intimidated about seeking help from entrepreneurship programs, or who may be uninformed about what's available to them.

This is where library programs like the ones offered by MCPL can help. Zappulla described the library staff as “*very impressive, very respectful, [and] very thoughtful.*” Muñoz said that the library excels in creating a safe and comfortable space where people can come and get helpful resources. Furthermore, MCPL staff provide support in Spanish and explain business-related concepts in terms that make sense and they do so respectfully. As a result, Muñoz said that he is comfortable with referring clients to get help from the library. He said,

“Those entrepreneurs are really trying to bootstrap. [The library] creates this place where people feel more comfortable seeking help.... [K]nowing that we can refer folks to Midcontinent, and that they're going to treat them with respect and not talk over them but work alongside them, is really important for us.”

Muñoz also highlighted the library’s ability to *effectively communicate* with potential entrepreneurs via channels where they can best be reached – e.g., doing Facebook posts in Spanish. He also noted that the library’s resources are more accessible than those from other support organizations, that the library has a larger volume of resources compared to other entrepreneurship programs, and that library staff respond faster to inquiries from potential entrepreneurs. As he explained,

“Sometimes when I refer folks to other organizations, it may be a couple of weeks till individuals can get some help or ... participate in a program. Midcontinent is doing a lot of stuff so you can always jump in and get ... some information and get plugged into a class or resource right away. They don't have to go out and wait for a while.”

These partnerships also ensure that entrepreneurs know about the programs that the community organizations offer. Niebaum noted that the classes she teaches reach many different people because they are advertised through the library. “*Because of all the different avenues that they can advertise and reach out to, we're getting people in diverse communities, underreached communities, underdeveloped communities that now feel that there's someone there to listen to them.*”

Another benefit to entrepreneurs from these partnerships is that they have *access to a wider range of free expertise* to draw upon. Library staff members have knowledge in certain areas of business and awareness of certain resources, while community partners have expertise in others. As a result, entrepreneurs receive information that is relevant and targeted to their situation. This was especially important during the lockdown due to COVID-19. Working in partnership with MCPL, Niebaum said she helped people in the Kansas City metro area apply for fund from the Payroll Protection Program. Of the seven people she assisted, five received the government funds.

Lastly, through the partnerships, entrepreneurs have a chance to *explore a range of potential outcomes* for their entrepreneurial efforts. As Zappulla explained,

“We work with a lot of clients who don't know anything about small business, and, as they learn, they realize it might not be for them. Or maybe their idea needs to be tweaked, or maybe now is not the right time. And we consider all of those positive outcomes in terms of the client.”

Winkel confirmed this reframing of what success means for entrepreneur. He explained that he helps people mitigate risk and encourages them to change their minds if that's the best path forward. As he noted,

"Sometimes we have businesses that decide, this is different than what I anticipated. This is not for me, I'm going to go back to my nine-to-five, that's okay. We see that as a success in that that person got to try it, got into the marketplace, and was able to exit from that minimally harmed financially or emotionally from the process."

A Mutually Beneficial Relationship

While community partner organizations have the expertise to provide library-based entrepreneurship programs, they don't necessarily have the bandwidth to communicate about those events. Several participants described how the library has helped them *augment their outreach and marketing efforts*.

Winkel described how the partnership has benefitted his organization this way, "My organization is a staff of two [W]e could put on those classes, but marketing them and organizing them, ... is huge! We don't quite have the capacity. So, it is a fantastic partnership where I can come in with the specific skill set that I have."

In other instances, the benefit to both parties came through *the referral process*. For example, in Zappulla's case, several people who eventually become clients at SCORE were sent there by library staff, who determined they would benefit from working with one of SCORE's mentors. The same was true for Winkel. He described each partner as contributing their expertise and working together to provide the best experience for the entrepreneur, instead of providing support in isolation. He said,

"We're getting some exposure to a community that we might not otherwise have been connected to. And then the library gets to add to their archives of things that they can offer to all the folks within their district.... [T]he symbiotic relationship makes a lot of sense ... As opposed to either of us trying to recreate the wheel."

As an entrepreneur, Niebaum said that the networking and exposure she has received as a library instructor had *fed back into her business*. For example, members of the community who met her as part of a library program are interested in hiring her to provide food services for future events. She also said that having her name connected with the library as a partner has been very beneficial. She said, "[The] fact that our name is connected with the library... [gives us] exposure, and then people will ask us to come and cater an event for them. So, it's helped us tremendously just in name recognition."

Finally, both the library and the partner organization benefit by *seeing the entrepreneurs that they help succeed*. For SCORE, this means that clients are better able to make smart business decisions because of the help they have received. As Zappulla said,

"We want our people to make decisions based on data, not just on intuition. And so, the library is a super resource in that regard. The fact that it's free, the fact that [library staff] will work with the client to ask their question in a better way or find the information that will help them make decisions, you know, is right up our alley."

The Library as Part of Support Ecosystem

Participants described the partnership between their organizations and the library as part of a larger entrepreneurial ecosystem. Some of organizations in this ecosystem are in proximity. For example, Zappulla's office at SCORE is in the same building as KC SourceLink, another small business resource provider, and she works closely with them.

Others offer complementary resources that work together to support small business owners. For example, Winkel described his organization as the first step toward providing robust support for entrepreneurs and that it serves as an introduction to the larger network of organizations. He said,

"We want to make sure that they're connected to the library and KC SourceLink and SCORE and everybody that would be helpful to their business....We can kind of help with the elementary-school things for their business, like grades one through three, we know a little bit about a lot of things, but then we need to connect to other resources to get them the full suite of help, that they really need to be successful."

At ESHIP, Muñoz and his team have launched a new project called the Toolbox that has supplied resources to small businesses across the region and plugged people into the ecosystem wherever makes the most sense. MCPL is a major resource partner in the Toolbox network.

Including the library in the entrepreneurial ecosystem is crucial because of its ability to reach communities of all types in the region. Zappulla and Muñoz both acknowledged the partnership with the library as fundamental to achieving broader entrepreneurial diversity and inclusion. As Muñoz said,

"Our goal really is to just create a more inclusive and equitable entrepreneurial ecosystem. [W]hat we've been focusing on is identifying the gaps in the entrepreneur ecosystem, trying to create pilot projects to fill in those gaps, bringing in partners to implement those programs, and then helping them seek funding to continue those programs."

Muñoz added that he identified barriers to entrepreneurship in two specific neighborhoods where ESHIP works and then designed a mentorship program with MCPL to run and manage the program. As he explained,

"[W]e've gone into two specific neighborhoods that we're working in where we've identified barriers. We surveyed the small businesses, [and] identified barriers entrepreneurs are running into. [Then we] came up with some ideas as to how to address those barriers. And then we contracted the library out to run and manage the program."

Shifting Perceptions of the Library

Collaborating with MCPL has changed community partners' view of libraries and their function. Winkel said that he once viewed libraries only as places to get books. Now he described the library as *"an access point for information."* Likewise, Muñoz stated that MCPL has *"changed my mind as to how involved a library can get and what libraries should be doing."*

The community partners agreed that without libraries, many small business owners would have to pay for access to information and programming that they need to operate their business. Muñoz noted that more entrepreneurs have realized that libraries can and do offer programming to support their efforts. He noted that this change in entrepreneurs' perceptions of the library occurred relatively recently. Winkel agreed with this sentiment noting that, *"When I tell people, 'You need to connect with the library and these classes,' nobody second guesses me now. But if, six years ago, I said 'You need to connect to the library' they're like, 'Okay, why?'"*

Several participants highlighted MCPL's interactive and individualized support through its Square One program as a key differentiator from other libraries. As Winkel said, *"they've kind of already exceeded expectations of what one would think a library does in a community."*

According to Muñoz, what sets MCPL apart is the fact that it is part of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. He also highlighted the proactive approach of Square One staff noting that they go out into the community, instead of waiting for potential entrepreneurs to come to them. Specifically, he said,

"I think they're just very proactive compared to any other libraries. I think [MCPL staff member] also does a really good job of getting out, networking in the communities and whatnot. And so, she's not sitting there waiting for people to come to her. She's going out there finding entrepreneurs, finding partnerships, and really promoting the services."

Winkel agreed that the library staff's personalized touch and the nature of the library programming made a big difference in terms of how much potential entrepreneurs benefit from the library. As he explained,

"There are certainly still things that are not Googleable. You need human interaction to be able to convey the ideas and the information...You need to have an interactive program, class, one-on-one session, to be able to convey that information ... The library still fulfills that particular role in connecting humans to information."

Growing Together

Participants did not identify any major challenges in their relationship with MCPL. They noted that while their partnerships have benefitted small business owners, not every program that has come out of a partnership has been successful. However, they appreciated the library's willingness to take risks on programming. As Winkel noted,

"It's just a testament that [MCPL] is willing to take risks. I mean, we have definitely had programs where we look back and we're like, I think it was a great idea. We did everything that we were supposed to do. But that was not a successful program. (laugh) And I think that's fine, that we've identified it, we tried it, we took the risk, that's the entrepreneurial story, you take the risk, you evaluate it after the fact."

Gold Star Participant Interviews

As noted in the methods section, we interviewed five Gold Star participants who had used the entrepreneurial programs and services offered by MCPL. Four of the five participants did both interviews. One individual was only interviewed in the Spring. Based on the interviews, Knology drafted profiles of each participant that highlighted their entrepreneurship efforts and how the library has supported these efforts. The profile pieces for all five interviewees are presented below.



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In Kansas City, A Local Non-Profit is Sparking a Renewed Interest in Sewing

With support from Mid-Continent Public Library, a Kansas City non-profit is helping members of the community build financial stability through sewing.

By Uduak Grace Thomas, Rupu Gupta, & Rebecca Norlander

Kansas City, MO – With support from Mid-Continent Public Library's (MCPL) Square One Small Business Services, Kansas City entrepreneur Eileen Bobowski is helping members of her community build financial stability by teaching sewing skills.

Bobowski is the executive director of The Sewing Labs, a non-profit organization whose mission is teaching the legacy of sewing for employment, entrepreneurship, and enrichment. She works alongside an operations manager and two part-time grant-funded sewing instructors. The Sewing Labs began offering classes in 2016 and received its 501c3 designation in 2018. Since its launch, the organization has partnered with various Kansas City nonprofits to help people learn sewing skills.

What initially drew Bobowski to MCPL was a need for high-speed internet. As she explained, Bobowski lives in a more rural area of Kansas City where the Wi-Fi can be spotty. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, she would often visit the library to use their internet. She had also previously used the library's publicly available conference rooms to host meetings. Through these library services, she was eventually introduced to the MCPL's Square One Small Business Services program and learned that the library offered various resources that could help her build out her organization.

"I don't have a marketing team, I don't have a development team," she said in an interview. "So, I can tap into those resources [at the library] and build my knowledge and gain more knowledge. That's what's been so wonderful about my Square One experience."

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 publications. In addition, the library offers mentoring to help guide small business owners.

These services have been crucial for Bobowski in building The Sewing Labs. For example, with support from the library, she has increased the organization's social media engagement. Through Square One, she learned strategies for setting up a LinkedIn profile and Facebook page. She has also benefitted from mentorship by Square One staff at different points in time. For example, when The Sewing Labs needed to create a video to

showcase some of their work, Bobowski relied on the assistance of library staff as well as their connections with local expertise in video production.

Besides its educational focus, The Sewing Labs has a social services mission. During COVID-19, volunteers with the organization offered their time and skills to make cloth masks from donated fabric. They also put together Ziploc bags containing the materials needed to sew 12 masks – including the fabric, a separate lining, elastic, and nose wires. With these kits, sewing instructors, volunteers, and teachers could safely stitch the masks from home.

Bobowski's team set up a drive-through service where people could pick up and drop off the kits. They also created an online portal where people who needed masks could request them. Many in the Kansas City community benefitted from these efforts especially since there was shortage of masks in the area in the early days of the pandemic.

This community project helped The Sewing Labs expand its volunteer base significantly. Since it closed its physical office and created a way for volunteers to work remotely, the organization has successfully grown its community by 1,000%, according to Bobowski.

"People would come and pick up those kits ... and then they'd come back in a week, and they'd drop off a kit and they pick up another one or they'd pick up 10 kits and come back two weeks later," she said. "And then we would turn around and give them to the different entities throughout the community that were requesting masks ... for example hospitals, hospices, police, fire, other nonprofits, [and] daycares." In total, over 200 volunteers have created more than 75,000 masks that were distributed for free to the Kansas City community.

In April 2020, Bobowski reached out to Singer, the sewing machine company, and asked if they would donate machines to her organization. She requested and received 30 machines from Singer. This was the start of a fruitful partnership between Singer and The Sewing Labs, one that has resulted in the creation of online content for interested stitchers.

According to Bobowski, the two entities connected over shared ideas like repurposing and upcycling / recycling, as well as "sewing wellness" which she described as fundamental to The Sewing Labs mission and values. "Sewing is so good for your health. It reduces anxiety, lowers your blood pressure, lowers your heart rate, puts you into creative flow."

The partnership between the two entities has continued to grow. More recently, Bobowski worked with Singer on Facebook live events focused on sewing. These events have covered topics such as how to thread a machine and how to repurpose a man's dress shirt into an apron. The sewing machine maker has also asked Bobowski's organization for help with making short how-to-videos that they can distribute to the public along with links to other resources created by Sewing Labs.

These videos are helping Singer respond to a renewed interest in sewing that has arisen in the wake of COVID-19. The company has received requests from customers asking for help with specific topics related to using their machines such as how to wind a bobbin on a Singer sewing machine. "[The pandemic] has certainly given a new focus to sewing," she said. "There are a lot of entrepreneurs that have grown out of the pandemic. They [were] stuck at home with nothing to do and sewing became an option for them to create new products. We've got a lot of phone calls from people who have started businesses during the

pandemic such as creating tote bags for sale and needing stitchers to help them.” In fact, the demand is so great that Bobowski is having a challenging time keeping up with all the requests.

Moving forward, Bobowski hopes to continue her relationship with MCPL and she advises budding entrepreneurs to reach out to the library for help with their business needs. She is also interested in getting more people interested in sewing. One way to do that could be through the library. For example, she suggested promoting The Sewing Labs’ projects and initiatives in display cases at the library. The display would provide relevant information to people about a positive community-based initiative that they could potentially participate in.

Bobowski also said that she could do with additional support with using technology. She has tapped the library to help with shooting videos for her organization’s partnership with Singer and she is continuing to look for other helpful resources. She also highlighted the classes that MCPL offers on using Canva for presentations as valuable for small businesses and non-profits. Additionally, she is reaching out to the library for support with fundraising and grant writing to help her secure the funds she needs to grow her organization. For example, she has used some of the library’s databases to find potential contacts for fundraising activities.

“We are a small organization,” she said. “We need to build our capacity [and] we need to find somebody that’s focused on fundraising, development and grant writing so that we can grow and scale, [and] build more relationships with companies like Singer. And I think one of the ways to do that will be through these databases.”



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Local Library Supports Independent Authors Seeking to Promote & Market their Work

Through Mid-Continent Public Library's Square One Small Business Services, independent authors like Darlene Deluca learn strategies and skills for marketing and promoting their books

By Uduak Grace Thomas, Rupu Gupta, & Rebecca Norlander

Kansas City, MO – Kansas City local Darlene Deluca regularly relies on support from Mid-Continent Public Library's (MCPL) Square One Small Business Services. As an independent author, Deluca said building a relationship with a local library is advantageous for lesser-known authors who want to get their name out and increase their readership.

Deluca writes contemporary romance novels, and women's fiction in general. Many of her books deal with women's relationships and friendships. Book fairs "are a great way to get in front of people who you know are readers," she said. "You can be on Facebook, and you can be on all the social media sites. But what's great about being in connection with a library is you know you are getting to readers."

But libraries do much more than connect authors and readers, according to Deluca. They are a particularly valuable resource for independent authors who are often working with tight budgets to get their books published. Independent authors often handle marketing and promotion of their books – essentially the same responsibilities as any other entrepreneur – on top of the demands of the creative writing process. Deluca says library staff understand that authors are small business owners and are willing to support them.

This is true at MCPL. The library'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 publications. In addition, the library offers mentoring to help guide small business owners.

Deluca learned about the Square One program directly from Mid-Continent. She first got involved after hearing a fellow writer talk about a fair for local authors at the library. Since then, Deluca has participated in several classes that teach important skills that are key to running a successful business. She noticed a clear difference from when she was marketing her writing on her own versus when she did so with guidance from the library. She described MCPL staff's individualized approach and personal attention as critical for helping her learn skills such as how to effectively advertise her work on Facebook.

That personal touch and access to expert help when she needed it was an important differentiator between Square One and other small business resources. Although the content that library staff were teaching was not new, the structure of the Square One program and the approach to teaching were extremely valuable. “Depending on how you learn and how you absorb things, it's just so much more effective to have a real person there,” she said. “Sitting and listening to a podcast or trying to read some instructions online, it just doesn't work for me.”

A key benefit of MCPL's entrepreneurship services, and similar programs in many other libraries, is that it is free. Given the MCPL's reputation, small businesses can trust that the information they get is accurate and that the classes will be worth their time. Additionally, Deluca highlighted the value of opportunities to meet with other local entrepreneurs who use Square One services and learn from their experiences and challenges.

Prior to COVID-19 related closures, Deluca participated in 4-5 events per year – including many at the library. At these events, she talked about her books and connected with people who like to read. It created a level of rapport that has been critical for independent authors like her. These networking opportunities with readers and other entrepreneurs were an unfortunate casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the lockdown, Deluca has tried to replicate the in-person experience using social media but notes that it is not the same as meeting face to face.

Deluca has continued to learn how to develop and use Facebook ads. Although she is not an expert, after training, Deluca says she is more confident about using social media ads and now incorporates them in her marketing strategy. She sees the social media website's user base as an opportunity to grow her readership through targeted advertising.

Furthermore, she intends to continue participating in MCPL's classes and reaching out to the library for support with building her business. She is also interested in learning more about how technology can support her marketing efforts and hopes that the library will offer more classes in this regard. For example, she would like to attend a class focused on the technical aspects of creating videos.

MCPL has been a boon for Deluca, but she notes that not every budding entrepreneur has access to the kind of support she has gotten. Her advice to other entrepreneurs is to seek out networking opportunities with local groups of authors as well as programs and services offered by their local library. “If you can find a place like the library where you can find experts [to]work with to just sift through all the information that's out there. If you can really hone in...on a small community like the readers at the library...it's very helpful,” she said.



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In Kansas City, A Local Entrepreneur is Building a Business Around a Family Tradition

With support from Mid-Continent Public Library, a Kansas City entrepreneur is following in his father's footsteps in the food industry.

By Uduak Grace Thomas, Rupu Gupta, & Rebecca Norlander

Kansas City, MO – With support from Mid-Continent Public Library's (MCPL) Square One Small Business Services, Kansas City entrepreneur Daniel Hipsher Sr. is building a profitable business around his family's barbecue recipe.

Hipsher has been around the barbecue industry since he was a child. In the 90s, he helped his father manage a barbecue restaurant before branching out on his own to launch his own place, Daniel's Barbecue, in 1996. Within a decade, he had successfully grown the business to include three locations and a catering division. Hipsher sold the restaurants in 2006 but retained the recipes, copyright, and logos. He manufactures and markets his own barbecue sauce, which is now sold in more than 100 stores.

Things have changed since Hipsher's first foray into entrepreneurship. He described his initial approach to running his small business as old-fashioned. When he was a child, entrepreneurs could set up shop and rely on their wits and customers to spread the word about their business and products. Now, business owners need a more strategic approach. As a result, Hipsher began looking for programs that aided small businesses like his own. This led him to MCPL's Square One Small Business Services.

The 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 publications. In addition, the library offers mentoring to help guide small business owners.

Hipsher particularly liked the individualized attention and advice that he received from the program staff. He said that he has worked with Square One to learn how to use social media more effectively to promote his brand and the story behind his business. He has learned different strategies for leveraging various social media platforms including Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, as well as photo formatting skills. Beyond the technical skills, Hipsher values the honesty of the Square One mentors when communicating their business expertise. "I think the Square One program is superior.... they give you their honest suggestions, ideas, [and] experience for free," he said.

In his time with Square One, Hipsher's perspective on businesses has changed. He also has a new mission. He is now using what he learned from running small businesses and working

with Square One to help other entrepreneurs. "I've gotten to the point where I kind of feel like I know what my purpose is," he said. Working with the library "ignited a passion in me to try to take my experience and help other people."

He now provides consulting services to other local entrepreneurs on how to bring their products to market. He analyzes their costs and looks for ways to save on labeling, manufacturing, and distribution expenses. He also helps other small brands navigate the process of getting their products into local groceries or specialty stores. He has even helped some of these businesses get their products into stores that he already has partnerships with. His efforts have helped them mitigate potential business losses due to COVID-19.

Helping others has led to significant growth for Hipsher's own business. He reported a 256% increase in year-to-date revenues by early 2021. He is now investing in a new business venture – creating a mobile artisanal market located near food trucks in Kansas City so that people can buy products while they're waiting for their food. He hopes to expand his business to more cities in the coming years. And he intends to continue to help grow other small businesses like his through a co-op or association model.

Hipsher feels that he has taken full advantage of the existing Square One programs and services. However, he does continue to reach out to his library mentors when he wants an honest, professional opinion about his business plans and ideas.

In future, he hopes that MCPL would consider offering more specialized programs. For example, a useful program would be one focused on helping small businesses navigate product distribution. "It sounds easy ... but there are so many nuances [and] steps to take to find the right distributor for what you're doing," he explained.

Hipsher himself has navigated the distribution process for 25 years and would be willing to share his expertise if the library decides to develop additional programming on the topic. Another area of potential expansion for Square One, he said, could be in the area of helping small producers find grant assistance. He recommends developing a service that tracks grant websites and notifies small business owners when new opportunities are added. The library could even consider offering help to small business owners with preparing and submitting grant applications.



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How One Entrepreneur is Building a Business around Fitness and Plant-based Nutrition

With support from Mid-Continent Public Library, a Kansas City businesswoman is helping companies develop wellness initiatives, and teaching people to enjoy plant-based diets

By Uduak Grace Thomas, Rupu Gupta, & Rebecca Norlander

Kansas City, MO – Kansas City resident Cindy Newland is one of several entrepreneurs using Mid-Continent Public Library's (MCPL) Square One Small Business Services to grow their small businesses.

Newland started Functional Fitness, a business focused on fitness and wellness, that targets local for-profit organizations. Prior to the pandemic, she went into corporate offices and taught wellness practices like yoga to employees. Newland has used MCPL's services, while developing her business over the past five years. Most of the library programs that she has participated in have focused on cultivating the online aspects of her business, such as advertising and social media.

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 publications. In addition, the library offers mentoring to help guide small business owners.

Support from the library helped Newland accomplish several goals related to building her business. For example, she received guidance from library staff on how to effectively use Facebook ads – an important part of ensuring profitability. Newland also highlighted some of the individualized support she has received from Square One business mentors such as help with using Microsoft PowerPoint and information about branding. She also said that even if the Square One staff are unable to help, they work with her to find solutions. These services are a boon for small business owners like Newland who may not have the resources to hire consultants. "The library will always answer questions that I have... and so far, I think they've answered all of them."

Many small businesses lost customers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some have been forced to close their doors at least temporarily. During the pandemic, Newland estimates she lost 75% of her business. The remaining 25% of her business comes from corporate clients who have continued to do fitness classes online. But losing customers has not slowed Newland down. Since the pandemic, she has expanded her business to include a new blog called Intentionally Eat which will provide recipes and related products that help people interested in a plant-based diet. One of her core products is a 21-day weight loss program.

Eventually, Newland hopes to go back to teaching fitness classes in person with safeguards in place. However, her focus has shifted to sustaining that business rather than growing it. Her primary goal now is growing her plant-based blog. She is currently working on creating content for the website and on increasing product sales. Long term, she hopes that Intentionally Eat becomes her main income source. And that it is a valuable resource for people who are interested in learning more about plant-based foods.

Newland expects to continue working with Square One staff as she builds her business. Moving forward, she said she would love to see more classes offered by the library. For example, she would be interested in a class focused on e-commerce to support businesses like hers that sell products online or one focused on creating webinars. She also hopes that the library can offer more ongoing opportunities for personalized support.

Based on her positive experiences with MCPL, Newland encourages other up and coming entrepreneurs to contact the library for support and guidance. She sees Square One as part of a complementary suite of resources that are available to entrepreneurs in the Kansas City area.

Her advice to others who are interested in entrepreneurship is to remember that building a business is hard work, and that failure is an important part of learning. Equally important is knowing when and how to change direction if a particular business idea is not working or if circumstances change suddenly as happened during COVID-19. For those who live in her area, she recommends proactively engaging with MCPL staff and the Square One program to learn more about available events and classes and take advantage of opportunities for one-on-one support. "I tell everybody that owns a business to absolutely get in touch and get some help," she said.



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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.

By Uduak Grace Thomas, Rupu Gupta, & Rebecca Norlander

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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