

Amplify Your Impact

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Building the Market for Business

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Libraries offer helpful resources for small businesses and entrepreneurs, but sometimes it seems like this is a well-kept secret. Bringing in an audience for business services takes intentionality. This article offers tips for successfully marketing library services to entrepreneurs and business owners.—*Editor*

Do you have an elevator speech prepared about your library? If you have 30 seconds or less to gain someone's interest, what do you highlight? For me, there's no doubt resources for entrepreneurs and small business are a part of my list. Why? Library business initiatives:

- Highlight the library's economic value and relevance to current day.
- Hold multi-generational appeal.
- Cause people to stop and listen. They are not aware of library activity in this realm.

"Wow! I had no idea the library had resources for small businesses." Music to my ears . . .

Building a business is not something to do alone. Most often, entrepreneurs starting or growing business ventures begin with limited resources. Public libraries are an ideal support for entrepreneurs and small businesses. Entrepreneurs can find a wealth of resources at the library, but there is often a disconnect between existing resources and knowledge of those resources. Libraries offer open access to space, information, technology training and expertise, not to mention powerful business research tools which open business possibilities to individuals with diverse backgrounds and inadequate finances. In some cases, libraries serve as spaces to network with other entrepreneurs.

Bringing in an audience for business services takes intentionality. For the most part, entrepreneurs are not aware of the resources a public library has to offer, so our efforts to raise awareness are crucial. There are many ways libraries of all sizes can establish themselves as business resources. It's important to designate someone to lead the way. Having a staff member serve as a specialist regarding business services, rather than a generalist, helps broaden the view and strategy. Library staff must look outside the library to know the community and its resources, and to create a business-friendly plan.

Pillars of Marketing

Marketing strategy focuses on 5 (or 7, depending on where you look) "P's," product, price, place, promotion, and people. Marketing is less a science than an art. Simply hanging posters, posting on

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a social media platform or two, or sending out a newsletter is not a formula that guarantees success. While these methods can be useful, strategic thinking and the curiosity to really understand your audience are key aspects to engaging them. For our purposes here, in marketing library services to business, we'll key in on 3 P's that incorporate relevant pieces of the others: Partnership, Packaging, and Promotion. Highlighted here are the experiences of three public libraries from different parts of the country: Plano Public Library (TX), Baltimore County Public Library (MD), and Richland Library (SC).

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Partnership

Just as building a business is not something to do alone, serving the entrepreneurial community is most successful as a team effort. This is the first step for me because of just how important it is. Explore your community to find out who the players are in your entrepreneurial ecosystem. Attend meetings and events of small business collaboratives, reach out to key organizations like SCORE, your Small Business Development Center, Chambers of Commerce, funding entities and coalitions.

Look for ways to integrate your library resources into the services these organizations are already offering. Invite business-serving organizations into the library. Host their workshops or services. These organizations help build the credibility of library business services and will be important collaborators in both programming and promotions. They help you understand your target audience. Partners will inform your activities and share information about library services with entrepreneurs they serve.

Partnerships strengthen the **credibility** of the library. Libraries around the nation are making a mark on small business development by bringing partners into the library to offer entrepreneurs tangible resources and valuable connections.

- Baltimore County Public Library (BCPL) runs 8-week Entrepreneur Academy cohorts, both English and Spanish versions, to guide patrons in business development efforts and to connect them with resources from both the library and the larger entrepreneurial community.
- Richland Library involves successful business owners in an Entrepreneur in Residence program in which patrons access guidance and practical tips from experienced professionals in group and one-to-one formats.
- Plano Public Library (PPL) offers SCORE Mentoring appointments at two library locations, and monthly learning and networking opportunities for small businesses, start-ups and those with entrepreneurial aspirations.



Aspiring entrepreneurs connect with business coaches and share ideas at the library.

Working with partners multiplies the level of **expertise** patrons can access. Partner organizations are an important source of information regarding trends and needs in the entrepreneurial community; partners are vital to planning for future library programming and resource expansion.

Involve partners in conversations regarding trends, needs, and plans for the future.

- Richland Library engages in a monthly meeting of partner organizations, a collaborative virtual opportunity to share happenings, work together and avoid duplication.
- Baltimore County Public Library networks with other business-serving organizations regularly to share information and cross-promote events and workshops.
- Plano Public Library engages partners at monthly education and networking programs, regularly seeks feedback and information from partner organizations, and holds leadership meetings at least annually to assess current program offerings and make plans for the next iteration.

Building partnerships exponentially increases the **reach** of promotional efforts, which we'll explore further in a moment. By collaborating with organizations serving the business community you will more effectively reach your target audience (their members/followers), and your message will make a greater impact, gaining credibility by communicating through these trusted organizations. When business-serving organizations recognize the value of library resources and initiatives for small business, they will start to tell the library story themselves! Talk about a way to amplify your message!

The key element of partnership is a truly collaborative approach. It is community-friendly to share information on other organizations and their events. Richland Library features a regular partner spotlight on their website. BCPL and Richland Library participate in business-related Facebook groups as part of their entrepreneurial ecosystems. PPL involves a variety of business experts in its programming schedule and involves SCORE Mentors in planning. These kinds of collaborative

communities foster sharing of trends, spark conversation around needs and gaps in services, and build relationship among organizations.

Partner organizations see your commitment and start to tell the library story. Success is evident when partners promote library resources through their own channels.

Partners also promote library programs in communities where collaboration is rich: local Chamber of Commerce, city economic development or business opportunity office, the US Small Business Administration and

its resource partner SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives), Small Business Development Center, 1 Million Cups community, neighborhood business associations, Community Development Financial Institutions, and others.

Packaging

Building an audience for business services requires offering a consistent package of resources and messaging. Entrepreneurs/businesses will engage with library staff and resources when they see that programs and services are consistent, high-quality, relevant and impactful to their business.

Packaging a **bundle** of programs and services together provides context around the individual elements. Motivating someone to attend a library program or use a service once is great, but “selling” them on the ongoing value of library resources and connections sets up a long-term connection. Give patrons a reason to return to the library often by offering a suite of quality programs and services.

Think about the **sequencing** of your programs. Hosting a business plan workshop without follow-up is a miss. Bring entrepreneurs back with a class on using Reference Solutions for competitive analysis or a business-to-business marketing plan. Connect business-building patrons to other organizations serving entrepreneurs by hosting training from an outside expert. Tie programs to tools found at your library, such as Adobe Creative Cloud products or photography equipment. Cast a vision for business support that involves your library as a valued participant in a larger network. Providing a sense of belonging among both partners and patrons builds a strong foundation for business support.

- PPL hosts a webpage dedicated to Business Resources, Mentoring and Networking. This allows entrepreneurs and small businesses to tie together classes, tools, equipment and networking opportunities available through the library.
- BCPL prints a quarterly event flyer listing a variety of in-person and virtual events, and distributes these flyers at all branches, as well as at community events. Their Resources for Entrepreneurs webpage includes business-related books links to 1-on-1 appointments, a list of business databases and partner information.
- Richland Library prints a monthly calendar of business and career events which is distributed at library locations and by a variety of community partners. In addition, the monthly Community Partner Spotlight posted on the Richland website offers another contextual view for business-owners.

Consider the **terminology** you use in naming and promoting library business resources. For maximum impact, use wording common to the industry you seek to serve. Stating that the library has “databases” tell the business owner nothing of value. However, stating the library offers tools for market research, competitive analysis, business plan creation, brand development, strategic planning, and industry profiles draws them in.

Be persistent with your business support efforts. Rather than dropping “unsuccessful” programs, engage in design thinking, gathering feedback and input, and looking for ways to adapt efforts for greater success. What can you learn about the time, location or format of programs you offer that can inform future efforts? Being consistent in the market, offering support and learning opportunities both individually and in partnership with other organizations, builds credibility and expectation that the library is a helpful source of resources.

Promotion

The fact that the library is offering programs or resources doesn’t get people there. Individuals who would benefit need to know when and where events are happening in advance, *and* they must believe participating holds value for them.

Generate participation by getting to **know your audience** and colleagues in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Connect with other business-serving organizations for successful promotions. Partners can help you identify where entrepreneurs and small businesses are looking for information and support. And they can promote your library resources to their own members/

followers. This could include a variety of avenues such as newsletters, e-blasts or text notifications, websites, blog posts, podcast interviews, targeted social media platforms such as LinkedIn, and announcements at earlier events.

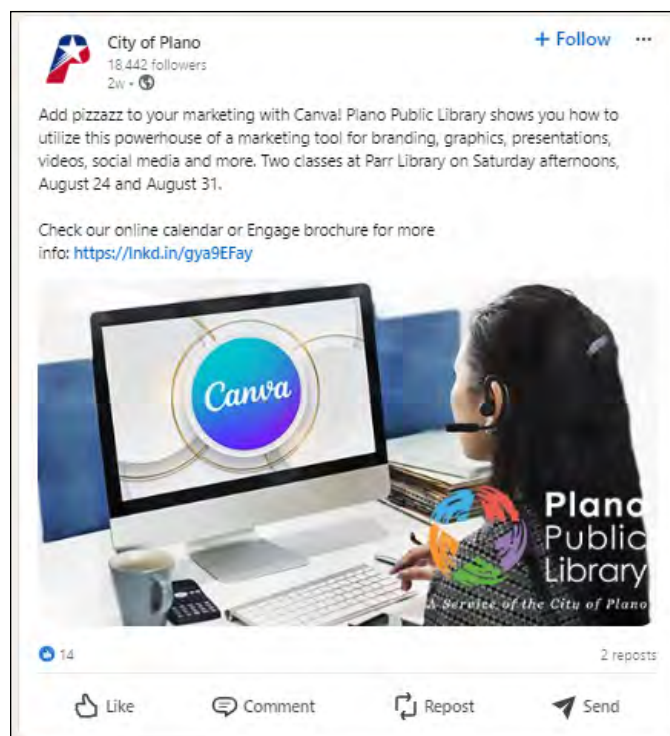
Consistency in both the look and tone of promotional messages strengthens the library brand. Yes, while the library helps businesses think about branding, it is important that the library also be mindful of the imagery and words we use for promotion. Each library and its leaders are alert to its own environment, community pulse and stakeholders. Your promotional tone should align with the way library resources fit into the larger picture for your community. Having a core writer/team helps provide consistent wording and storytelling.

Is your library a source of basic support, research and information, technology tools, or networking and collaboration in your community? Create visual images, photos and video clips featuring library patrons who use your business services for impactful storytelling.

The toolbox of promotional options is large! **Use multiple modes** of promotion to draw interest in the library and its resources as a go-to source for business and entrepreneurship support. What best reaches your community? Likely it's a combination of print and digital communications. Check in with community partners to see what they find effective. Include both broad announcements as well as more focused appeals. See table 1.

Use engaging visuals including both images and video clips. Incorporating informational tips along with an invitation to an upcoming workshop can draw in new followers. Collaborate with other city, county or federal departments to craft messaging that merges the goals of both entities.

Incorporate non-traditional promotional methods and partner-led promotions into your plans. Establish relationships with local publications and try an occasional press release for unique topics or events.



Gain visibility with professionals by posting business-focused programs and resources on LinkedIn.

Table 1. Examples of broad and focused modes of promotion

Broad announcements	Focused appeals
Advertising	e-blast to business owners/entrepreneurs
Flyers	Event notices in partner organization newsletters
Website elements	Announcements at business owner/coalition meetings or events
Social media	Mention in Chamber of Commerce newsletter or e-blast
General newsletters	Podcast interviews (partner organizations)

- BCPL, Richland Library and PPL all use opt-in business email lists to send regular updates and event announcements to interested parties. This is an extremely effective avenue for reaching out intended audience.
- PPL places items in newsletters or social media collaboratively with Economic Development and even the police department, as well as in weekly SCORE eNewsletters.
- City of Columbia Office of Business Opportunities promotes Richland Library programs in their weekly newsletter.
- Baltimore County Chamber of Commerce advertises BCPL events in their monthly emails.

Foster a Personal Touch

Word of mouth is still an extremely effective marketing tool! Personal testimonials from people you know are valuable. In a former role I created a campaign centered around this important element. We called it "Tell A Friend." Why do you think businesses ask for and post product reviews? Hearing directly from someone you know is even more impactful. Networking at community meetings and events offers opportunities to make new personal contacts and share the valuable resources of the library. The effectiveness of getting out into the community is hard to overstate.

Sometimes overlooked as avenues for promotion of adult-focused programming, schools and PTAs are an excellent promotional partner. Many school districts seek to engage parents and/or connect families with resources to strengthen and support families more broadly, including economic opportunity. Sharing information about

business-focused programs and services is often of interest to both parents and students. In Plano, many high school students are already trying out entrepreneurship, with a variety

***Person-to-person testimonials
are highly valuable!***

of thriving young businesses underway! And since not all students in any community are college-bound, sharing learning opportunities around entrepreneurship is a benefit for youth and adults alike. Plano Public Library, Richland Library and BCPL all offer youth entrepreneurship programs, as well as adult-focused endeavors.

Outreach opportunities are another great avenue for promoting business initiatives. At Plano Public Library, Outreach takes library staff into the community hundreds of times each year in diverse settings to share information on library resources, offer library card registration, and connect patrons with opportunities for lifelong learning. Especially post-pandemic the nation has seen a rise in remote work, increasing small business optimism and growing interest in entrepreneurship. Access to a library enhances all these pursuits, so share the information wherever you go!

Invest in the Future

In an area of services as dynamic as business and entrepreneurship, it's important to keep things fresh and fun. Always be looking for new ways to serve this audience, which is growing and multi-generational.

Approach programming and promotions with a growth mindset, considering your business initiatives as an area for your own learning and growth. While you may not know a lot about business development, working with partners and collaborating with other libraries provides insights and ideas. Consider challenges and setbacks as experience-builders and keep trying new things.

Learn from participants in your programs about topics of interest and where they heard about your services. Listening to your audience and partners will inform and inspire you.

Continually assess business initiatives and add services as you are able. Trying something new helps expand the entrepreneurial ecosystem for your community. Whether it is a service specific to the library or is a program offered in collaboration with partners, your business-focused community will appreciate your innovative thinking.



Partnership is key! SCORE Mentors and library staff team up at Plano Public Library.

Maintain an inclusive, multi-generational approach. Business appeals to a broad cross-section of the community and individuals from differing age groups and cultures seek information in different ways. Seek out diverse perspectives and engage with a variety of partner organizations to cultivate a following for your business initiatives. Diverse participation will enrich your programming and promotions.

Nurture community. This is a message that bears repeating. In building business there are so many reasons to connect with others. This goes for library personnel driving business initiatives, the larger network of business-serving organizations, and individual entrepreneurs. Reach out to learn more about your own entrepreneurial ecosystem or about fostering business programs and services at your library. Join the ALA Libraries Build Business community for a wealth of experience and innovative ideas. There's no reason to go solo.

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