

Huron Small Business Enterprise Centre – Phone Survey 2006

Huron Small Business Enterprise Centre

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Summary

Personal touch seems to be the service most appreciated at the Huron Small Business Enterprise Centre (HSBEC). Having assistance with a search for information in a friendly helpful manner continues to be identified as valuable when we are moving into an even more electronic environment of research. Fluctuating markets and a decrease in customers are proving to be challenges impacting time management as the confidence of the entrepreneur's is shaken and as they look to the need to diversify sources of income. Once again, the geography of Huron County impedes access to resources. There was an expressed desire for expanded hours, and for the provision of similar resources in Goderich. In order to make this outreach viable, there may be the potential demand for increased advertising, and for the promotion of HSBEC to be more visible and be better known to the community at large, as identified by one of the entrepreneurs in their query of: "How do we (HSBEC) let people know about the great services we offer?"

Preamble

The Huron Business Centre (HBC) is a one-stop shop for small business operators in Huron County. As a co-operative composed of several community based organizations, the Huron Business Centre is a source of help for local entrepreneurs who are starting-up a small business, or who are established and are looking for general business information. The Huron Business Centre prides itself on assisting local entrepreneurs in developing viable and sustainable businesses.

(www.smallbusinessshuron.ca)

Huron Small Business Enterprise Centre (HSBEC) works in collaboration with the services offered by the Huron Business Centre (HBC)

Purpose of this Survey

The purpose this survey is to gather feedback regarding the usefulness of the services and resources of the Huron Small Business Enterprise Centre (HSBEC) at the HBC.

Background

An important principle of leadership is to lead by example. In order for the HSBEC to continue to provide the most up to date resources for businesses, it is important to research into the desires and requirements of the customer (in this case local entrepreneurs), to anticipate the subsequent actions required to compete locally,

nationally and internationally as entrepreneurs with viable and sustainable businesses.

Methodology

Upon consulting with Business Consultant Alison Lobb, the decision was reached to use a telephone survey, calling people on a contact list who had used the services at the Huron Business Centre from January 2004 to May 25, 2006. The first 50 names were selected at random - every tenth name. As well, 20 additional names were chosen by the Business Consultant.

The summer season proved a major factor in the challenge to reach people. Phone calls were made at different times of the day and week – morning, afternoon, evenings, weekends and holidays.

Even though the sample is small, it may be inferred that common patterns and repetition of comments is suggestive of the reliability and accuracy of the feedback.

Survey Questions - Please see Appendix A

Feedback and emerging themes

In total to date, of the phone calls made:

- No longer available – 16
- Interviews – 30
- Refusal – 1
- Eliminated – (3 calls with no return) – 5
- Messages left – 46
- Client returning call - 5

Of the interviews conducted most had started their business, were already in business when they contacted the Huron Business Centre with a few who were not in their prospective business any longer because of health, employment opportunity, or didn't fit the criteria for assistance. One did not start their business because they realized there was not a market in Huron County; they appreciated the process made available at the Huron Business Centre to come to this decision (Appendix A, Question 1")

The top 3 reasons that most influenced entrepreneurs to open their own business were (Appendix A, "Question 7"):

- Flexible schedule/create own work environment
- To be your own boss/high degree of control
- self fulfillment

In priority of classification of business identified (Appendix A, "Question 10"):

- Service
- Retail
- Hospitality/Food
- Manufacturing
- Construction
- Other

Twenty six people are currently employed full time (numbers include themselves) with 11 working part time and 5 seasonal. The vast majority are single proprietorship.

Most businesses were registered (only 2 at HBC); most had written a business plan and were operating as outlined, however, a limited number had revised and updated. (Appendix A, "Questions 12 & 13")

Of the businesses reporting on question 14 regarding use of cash flow projections (CFP), 15 had prepared a CFP compared to 9 businesses that did not. Of the 15 businesses that had created a CFP, 10 continued to use them and out of those ten, 7 report they had met or succeeded their projections. This seems to be influenced by participation in the Self Employment Benefits (SEB) program which expects and supports the use of financial statements. Of the 15 who had created CFP, 6 reported they had not reached their projections (3 had continued to use their CFP and 3 did not use their CFP). Two businesses that did not use their CFP reported that they did in deed reach their CFP. Many indicators may influence these results. Use of a CFP may be an area that needs more attention and could be explored further (Appendix A, "Questions 14 &15")

The vast majority of businesses did not secure a loan to start up. Of those that did, the amount was most often in the \$20,000-50,000.00 range and easy to OK to secure. (Appendix A, "Question 16")

Twice the number of businesses had made changes with respect to changed/expanded services and staffing needs, with the remaining number reporting that they had stayed the same, scaled back, took part time employment or are struggling. (Appendix A, "Question 17")

Market advise came mostly from Alison Lobb at HSBEC (highly recommended and with gratitude) followed by friends and family as the main source of information. SEB, Summer Company, similar business, interviews and the internet were also sited. (Appendix A, "Question 18")

The most pressing issues facing business today are listed in order of those identified by entrepreneurs as the most pressing to those least pressing. (Appendix A, "Question 19"):

1. Time Management
2. Not enough customers
3. Cash flow/profit
4. Competition
5. Financing
6. Staffing
7. "Red Tape"
8. Other – market stability fluctuating, strike at Mine in Goderich (under table construction), how to promote self and business in community.

Flexibility and personal control were identified as the most appreciated benefits for self-employment while by far the greatest challenge of self employment is the absence of steady income followed by the long hours and need for perseverance to continue with business. (Appendix A, "Questions 20 & 21")

The overwhelming majority of interviewees will and do recommend self employment however, many are quick to qualify that it "depends on the person". Only one person would not recommend self employment. (See Appendix A, "Question 22")

There are very diverse needs identified that would assist interviewees in their businesses today – everything from a stable market, providing advertising design, and administrative organization to having a more flexible process to launch their business. Having an approved business plan prior to ‘start up’ was identified as a barrier. (Appendix A, “Question 23”)

Question 24 asks “Which of the resources at the Huron Business Centre were useful to you?”

Of the resources identified as the *most useful* was the Business Consultant, Alison Lobb, who was accentuated with comments like “Awesome”, “Extremely”, “Very!!”, “Fabulous”, and “The best!”

The remaining fall in order from most useful to least useful:

- Business workshops
- Business library
- 3-day business start-up workshop (SEB)

Then:

- Ongoing support through the SEB program
- Consultation with the SEB Coordinator, Carol Leeming
- Public access to computer/fax

Followed by:

- Huron Women in Networking dinners
- Website – www.smallbusinesshuron.ca

And finally:

- Consultation with the Loans Manager, Jim Niesen
- October trade fairs (Expos)
- Employment services – resumes, job search, EI registration

No one interviewed used financial loans available through HBDC

Many of the resources offered at the Huron Business Centre are “Never used”.

The list below shows the frequency that the entrepreneurs identified resources as “Never used” or unaware of to somewhat aware of but still “Never used”:

Most frequently identified as “Never used”

- Loans available through HBDC
- Employment services – resumes, job search, EI registration
- Website – www.smallbusinesshuron.ca

Then:

- October trade fairs (Expos)
- Public access to computer/fax

Followed by:

- Consultation with the SEB Coordinator, Carol Leeming
- Ongoing support through the SEB program
- Consultation with the Loans Manager, Jim Niesen

- Huron Women in Networking dinners

And finally:

- 3-day business start-up workshop (SEB)
- Business workshops
- Business library

Only one person did not use Business Consultant, Alison Lobb

All found their consultation at the Huron Business Centre useful with the majority of the questions asked by the entrepreneurs answered by staff at the Huron Business Centre. Not only did they report that they would refer people to the Huron Business Centre; they do! An example of this being the partner of one of the interviewees works at a bank and gives the HBC telephone number to everyone who comes into the bank wanting to start a business because of the successes they have seen. (Appendix A, "Questions 25, 26, 27")

The most common response when asked how the Huron Business Centre is described to friends is that HBC is "Helpful", "Friendly", "Personalized to your issues", "Invaluable", "Excellent", and "If they (HBC staff) don't have the answer...they can steer to the right source!" There were only a few comments about "forget if you want money; wouldn't recommend". (Appendix A, "Question 28")

A sampling of suggestions for improvement to services provided by the Huron Business Centre are (Question 29):

A number of times there was an expressed desire for:

- A site besides only in Seaforth (in Goderich)
- For the HBC to be open to serve the schedules of people who have day jobs ("...open 'til 7 pm")
- Follow up after SEB program at about 6 months and 1 year to give encouragement, advise, and support. A number of past SEB interviewees wondered now statistics are gathered reporting successful and unsuccessful businesses when there was no follow up.

Additional suggestions included:

- The website has all separate services posted and proves hard to identify which area is for you.
- "More 'Alison's'"
- More computer training
- Programming for people semi-retiring or women leaving abusive relationships

With a few criticisms:

- Writing a detailed "business plan is a deterrent for many people" who do not have the writing skills but have the capacity to work hard for their own business.
- Wanted to quit a job to start a business but then didn't qualify for SEB because the employer would have to lie about laying off an employee and needed to be honest. This placed extra burden on the start up of this small business when SEB would have been helpful. Need more flexibility in qualifying for Self Employment Benefits.

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Appendix A

Huron Business Centre – Phone Survey 2006

In the past few years, you visited the Huron Business Centre and had a consultation with Alison Lobb, the Business Consultant, regarding a business start-up you were considering. We are conducting a phone survey regarding our client services and would appreciate your input.

The survey should take about 5 minutes. All those participating in the survey will have their name entered into a draw for a bottle of maple syrup (or chocolates, if you prefer). However, the survey information will be compiled in an anonymous format.

The first 50 names were selected at random - every tenth name on my contact list for 2004 and 2005. As well, 20 additional names were chosen by the Business Consultant. The survey consultant, Jane Hoy, will phone these individuals during the day and leave a message if they are not available. Follow-up calls will be made in the evening.

Name of business:

ID _____

Name of contact person:

Date of call #1: D ____ M ____ 2006 Time:
_____ am pm

Date of call #2: D ____ M ____ 2006 Time:
_____ am pm

Date of call #3: D ____ M ____ 2006 Time:
_____ am pm

Response:

G Interview conducted

G Denied interview Why

G Phone message left, no response

G No phone? No longer at that address

G Requested mail out survey

How easy/difficult was this? G easy G okay G impossible
Was your loan ... G under \$20,000 G \$20,000-50,000 G over \$50,000

17. Has your business expanded, or changed significantly, since you opened?
G yes G No

In what way has it changed since you opened?

- Change of location
- Increased size of business site
- Increased staffing needs
- Expanded/changed services
- Other (specify) _____

18. Did you get valuable market advice from anyone? Who? Explain.

19. What is the most pressing issue in your business today? Briefly explain.

- Staffing
- Cashflow/ profit
- Financing
- Time management
- "Red tape"
- Not enough customers
- Competition
- Other (specify) _____

20. Name two benefits that you appreciate most about being self employed?

21. What are the two biggest challenges about being self employed?

22. Would you recommend self-employment to family or a friend? G yes
G no
23. What is the one most important thing that would assist you in your business today?

Huron Business Centre Services – I would like to ask you a few questions about the services at HBCS

24. Which of the resources at the Huron Business Centre were useful to you?

Services	Useful	Somewhat useful	Not useful	Never used
Consultation with the Business Consultant, Alison Lobb				
Consultation with the Loans Manager, Jim Niesen				
Consultation with the SEB Coordinator, Carol Leeming				
3-day business start-up workshop (SEB)				
Ongoing financial support through the SEB program				
Loans available through HBDC				
Business workshops				
Business library resources				
Huron Women In Networking dinners				
October trade fairs (Expos)				
Employment services - resumes; job search; EI registration				
The public access computers / fax				
Our website at www.smallbusinesshuron.ca				

25. Did you find your consultation at the Business Centre useful? G yes
G no
26. Were the majority of your questions answered? G yes
G no
27. Would you recommend our service to others? G yes
G no
28. How would you describe the services provided by Huron Business Centre to a friend interested in starting a business.

29. How could the services offered at the Business Centre be improved? Explain.

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Acknowledge and thank