

# SBS IN THE NEWS



## Getting the most from government funds

### Food and wine shop The Greene Grape shows how small businesses can obtain training funds from NYC's Department of Small Business Services.

By Joyce Hanson  
Friday, August 07, 2009

When Amy Bennett and Jason Richelson were hit with a problem most small business owners would love to have—managing the rapid growth of the food and wine shops they started in 2004—they needed to train some of the 50 employees they had hired to work at The Greene Grape's three locations in Brooklyn and Manhattan.

So in April they filed an application with NYC Business Solutions, a unit of the city's Department of Small Business Services. They later received \$31,375 in training funds for courses such as butchery, cheese making, wine appreciation and retail basics, including customer service and online ordering. The Greene Grape, which is expected to reach \$5 million in sales this year, will also contribute \$18,000 to the training program, which is projected to result in average wage increases of 12% for all trainees.

"There is a strong need for this kind of retail shopping in the neighborhood, and we have passionate employees who want to know more about artisanal food traditions," said Ms. Bennett. "But without this training grant, we didn't know what to do."

As the city's small businesses deal with rapid economic and technological change, many are revising their business models to include worker training. But as the recession grinds on, many are also seeking government help because they can't do it completely on their own. The challenge, of course, is to figure out how to cut through the red tape that can prevent a business from even bothering to apply.

Overcoming that challenge can result in a significant payoff. In this quarter alone, \$1.5 million in NYC Business Solutions training funds are available. Businesses can pre-

apply for the next quarter's grants by going to [www.nyc.gov/training](http://www.nyc.gov/training) or calling 311.

How can a small business without experience in requesting government funds submit a winning proposal?

"Don't look at the application and requirements and put down your pen," Ms. Bennett urged. "As a small business, you have a thousand things on your plate, but plow through. You will get assistance."

Sara Schlossberg, director of training for NYC Business Solutions, agreed. Once a business has made it past the pre-approval stage, she said, it will be assigned a senior account manager for one-on-one help in writing a strong proposal.

The department is hungry for innovative ideas where both businesses and employees benefit, Ms. Schlossberg said. "We're one of the best-kept secrets of the city."

Lacey Ruben, the senior account manager assigned to work with The Green Grape, noted that winning proposals go to businesses that stay on top of industry trends.

"If you don't get picked the first time around, you may get funds the second quarter you apply," she advised. "There are a lot of ways to approach training. It's about adapting your business model to this changing economy."

Businesses should be prepared for government oversight. But if a firm is in good order, oversight need not be daunting, said Robert Moses, a retired PricewaterhouseCoopers accountant who now volunteers with SCORE Counselors to America's Small Business. A nonprofit affiliated with the U.S. Small Business Administration, SCORE sometimes shares clients with NYC Business Solutions.

In fact, Mr. Moses said, companies often find their bottom line improved because they learn the discipline of writing a business plan. And, he noted, the advice is both professional and free.

“The rules are not that onerous to follow, and the benefits you get can be really helpful,” he said.

Among those benefits is better positioning when the recession lifts, Ms. Bennett noted. Although she is paying for The Greene Grape’s employees to learn portable skills, she has found that her staff is loyal because “they really appreciate that you’re going to bat for them.”

One such staffer is Michael Robertson, manager of the wine store in Fort Greene, and another is Glenn Hills, who works just a block away as the provisions store’s cheese counter manager. The two frequently brainstorm together on wine and cheese pairings. This summer, Mr. Hills is attending Cheese U Boot Camp, an intensive three-day course of study at Murray’s Cheese in Greenwich Village, while Mr. Robertson will work toward advanced certification with the International Wine Center in Chelsea.

“There’s tremendous demand and a lot of cheese counters opening up in Brooklyn,” Mr. Hills says. “Everyone’s got their eye on each other. Some of my cheese idols are teaching this class.”