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A big lift for small biz: More than 1,000 entrepreneurs swarm Daily News conference

BY Lore Croghan
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER
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From virtually every corner of the city and the suburbs, more than 1,000 entrepreneurs packed the Daily News' Small Biz: Big Impact Conference last week to learn and to network.

Local small business owners, lenders and government officials shared their experiences and expertise in panel discussions on how to get financing, use technology effectively and prepare for the economic turnaround.

The crowd included seasoned players such as Alan Siege, 55, of Park Slope, Brooklyn, who's been in business as a branding consultant since 1996, as well as entrepreneurial newcomers like Marilyn Lobos, 29, who launched her business last month.

A photographer and videographer, Lobos came to Small Biz: Big Impact to get ideas about how to market her startup, called Desperately Seeking Marilyn.

"I'm the affordable option for people who are having a wedding, or want a video made to sell their car," explained Lobos, who lives in the Financial District in Manhattan.

At the conference, co-sponsored by CUNY, the Borough of Manhattan Community College and Newtek Business Services, the audience was urged to comparison-shop the free counseling services offered by various government agencies.

"If it doesn't click, go somewhere else," said Pravina Raghavan, the U.S. Small Business Administration's New York district director. "It's really about chemistry."

Her agency operates Small Business Development Centers in every borough and is affiliated with the Service Corps of Retired Executives, or Score NYC.

Lynette Simmons, 46, who owns a small business called 6/fifteen, vowed to seek counseling help after listening to one of the panelists, Stephen Kessler of Score.

"I really would love to have a mentor," said the Norwood, Bronx, resident, who makes all-natural lotions, soaps and hair-care products in her kitchen and sells them on etsy.com. Her chocolate-whipped shea butter is one of her best sellers.

The city Department of Small Business Services also offers resources: a network of Business Solutions Centers and an online service, NYC Business Express, to help entrepreneurs figure out what permits and licenses they'll need, **Small Business Services Commissioner Rob Walsh said.**

Conference moderator Scott Wenger, the editor of The News' weekly Your Money section, told the crowd he had tested the Business Express site for a fictional dance-instruction business. In about five minutes, he learned he would need 18 separate permits or licenses.

Walsh replied that the city is continuing to try to streamline the startup process.

Many entrepreneurs told anecdotes of work that sometimes stretched around the clock.

Jessica Johnson, co-owner of Johnson Security Bureau, got a round of applause from the crowd after she said she recently put on a guard's uniform and worked an overnight shift at a construction site after a worker called in sick.

A hot topic during all three panels was whether entrepreneurs need to prepare a written business plan.

“If there’s not a story for us to follow when you’re not in the room, that’s a hindrance,” said Don DiMartini, vice president of the [New York Business Development Corp.](#), a small business lender.

Several other panelists insisted that a business plan wasn’t crucial — more important, they said, was an ability to show a startup was generating sales.

[Nelly Yusupova](#), founder of consulting firm Digital Woman, argued that not only do entrepreneurs need a business plan, they should also have a technology plan, detailing how they’ll make tech upgrades as sales grow.

During the technology talk, [Jay Greenstein](#), president of clothing chain R.A.G. New York, detailed the benefits of search engine optimization, which involves adding keywords to a Web site to try to ensure it comes up on the first page of an online search.

Search engine optimization has helped R.A.G.’s Web site draw 600 visitors a day. When the company first started selling online, it typically made three sales a day.

[Ben Kaufman](#), founder of [Quirky.com](#), described another business phenomenon recently transformed by the Internet: crowd-sourcing.

Quirky designs a product each week, “from spatulas to snow sleds,” using crowd-sourcing for input from a huge online community his business has assembled.

SmallBizTechnology.com editor [Ramon Ray](#) urged the crowd to use videos of customers as a Web marketing tool. One attendee, personal trainer [Kevin Wilson](#), loved the idea.

His business, Cheetah Fitness, offers training in clients’ homes and will be running a series of group workouts in

Cadman Plaza Park in [Brooklyn Heights](#) this summer. Wilson, 39, of [Bedford-Stuyvesant](#), Brooklyn, plans to shoot a promo video to show what boot camp will be like.

[Sarah Endline](#), founder of candy company Sweetriot, talked about introducing herself to comic [Jerry Seinfeld](#) when he happened to be sitting next to her in a restaurant.

Most of the time, hobnobbing with celebs is the last thing on Endline’s mind. Since 2008, when the economy started to deteriorate, she and her staff scrutinized every idea for its potential return on investment.

“We have to be so careful with every dollar,” she said.

In the days after the conference, many attendees wrote in to say how much they’d benefited.

“Thank you Daily News for a terrific, informational, spontaneous day,” said [Fredricka Thelwell](#). “This is my third year. ... I started my business last year — thank you for your help.”