



## Free Service Lets New Business Owners Apply For City Licenses

By: Shazia Khan  
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After traveling extensively through Europe, Johnny Celestin wanted to bring its cafe culture to his adopted hometown of Harlem.

"Having something like that in this community where I live in was important to have," says Celestin.

In December 2008, Celestin realized his dream and opened his cafe and bakery, named "La Perle Noire," the French for "The Black Pearl," on the corner of 131st Street and Lenox Avenue. Looking back, the first-time business owner says initially his head was spinning when learning about the the necessary paperwork to open and operate a cafe.

"When you started to look at all the things that you needed to put together, to actually get the license and fill all the requirements that are needed by the city and the Health Department and everything else, it became really overwhelming very fast," says Celestin.

He says he saved time and frustration by going through **NYC Business Express**, an interactive web site created by the city's **Department of Small Business Services**.

"Before NYC Business Express, businesses would need to go to multiple agencies, would need to hire

somebody and would need to expend a lot of energy trying to figure out all of the things that that government asks for when opening a business, whether it's permits, or licenses, or certifications or inspections," says David Margalit of the Department of Small Business Services.

The free online service informs users about the city, state and federal requirements needed to establish their particular business and allows them to apply and submit online for certain city licenses and permits.

It was first launched in 2006 to meet the needs of the food and beverage industry, but it has since grown to accommodate a total of 20 other sectors, including health care and retail. It provides all the information needed to open anything from a pawnshop in a commercial space to a day care in one's home.

Overall, administrators feel their service is more needed than ever.

"We had about 300 startups come to us for work with us real intensively on opening their businesses last year. Through last June and through this June, it's been about 600," says Margalit.

At the moment, New Yorkers can apply and submit online for 33 licenses, permits and certifications from a number of city agencies. By the end of the summer, the site will allow for 50.

As for Celestin, he recently received his sidewalk café license and looks forward to a busy summer.