

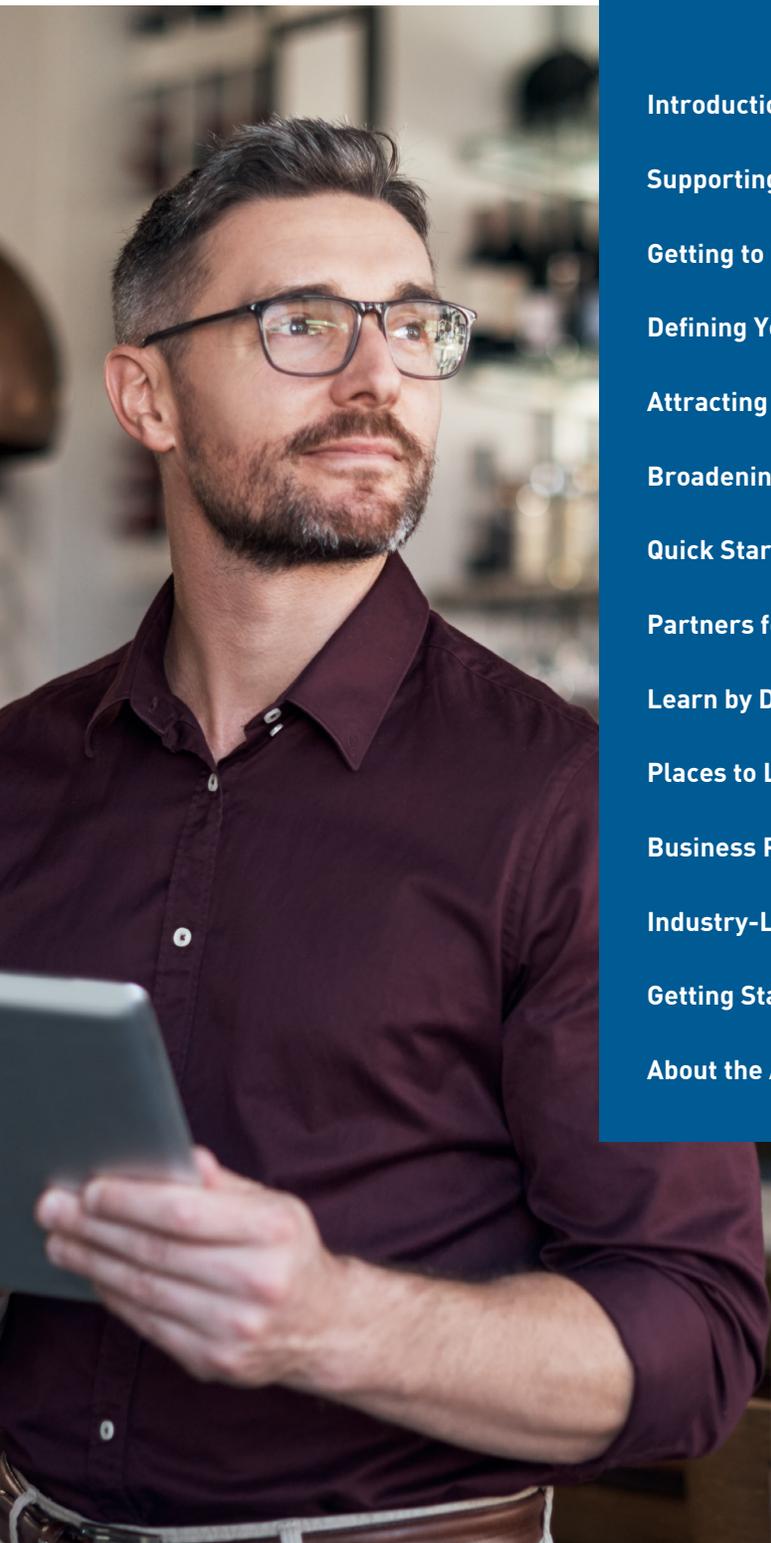


NO MBA REQUIRED:

A Library Action Plan
for Engaging with the
Business Community

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**NO MBA REQUIRED: A Library
Action Plan for Engaging with
the Business Community**

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BUSINESSES ARE CRITICAL TO YOUR COMMUNITY

This action plan offers real-world suggestions, sources, and program ideas for public libraries that want to connect with their local business community. Some may think a dedicated business information specialist or librarian on staff is needed for this task, but any curious staff member with research skills can learn the specifics of business information. One of the many benefits of working in libraries is that our expertise is readily shared among peers. There are no trade secrets when helping entrepreneurs, and there's a wide network of service and information providers who can help along the way. Similar to other areas of librarianship, you can learn by doing!

Any curious staff member with research skills can learn the specifics of business information.

Libraries are increasingly being defined by what they do differently. Think about the services and programs you provide. What sets your library apart from others in your area? Maybe your makerspace is especially popular or you regularly receive compliments from parents about the quality and variety of your services for children or teens. Having current print titles in stock probably isn't what comes to mind when people think about your library—it's the people who help them and how they feel when they leave. Patrons are constantly making comparisons about the services and products in your library, just as they do when shopping. While a library isn't a business in the traditional sense, it's our job to provide a service to the widest group of patrons who support our existence, including local businesses.

In the library field, we continue to challenge outdated ideas, and providing help to businesses is a chance to give back to your community in a new way.

Making a quantitative argument for your business initiative and showing a return on investment during your activities are critical elements of any new library service. This is especially difficult if you rarely answer business-related questions, but the lack of business requests shouldn't be interpreted as a lack of need. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration, there are over 31 million small businesses in the United States, employing more than 60 million people and accounting for the majority of new jobs each year.¹ To put this in perspective, there are more than 130,000 public and private elementary and secondary schools in the United States,² educating more than 51 million children as of fall 2020.³ Libraries are rightly dedicated to the early education of children, but with a small business community with 10 million more to serve, can libraries afford to avoid the potential for growth with this demographic?

There are over 31 million small businesses in the United States, employing more than 60 million people and accounting for the majority of new jobs each year.¹

Operating in the not-for-profit or governmental world, it's understandable that some library staff would be uncomfortable with the perception that the library is "pro-business." While that term may be packed with political connotations, the type of help libraries can provide businesses is simply in the form of reference questions of another kind, not a political statement. It's possible to support for-profit enterprises while maintaining our unbiased reputation. For business information specialists, supporting local businesses is equivalent to supporting economic development and the community as a whole. Many of your patrons in the workforce could benefit from some sort of business service—but they might not know you're able to help!

SUPPORTING THE COMMUNITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

When unforeseen circumstances affect your local business community, your library's assistance, facilities, and networking capabilities may be essential support. Floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, wildfires, and most recently, the coronavirus pandemic, are events that interrupt day-to-day business operations. Even if such events cause minimal damage, your community should know you're there to help. These challenging situations present an opportunity for libraries to show their value as a source of information, access, and support.

Government relief program support

Local and national relief programs and grant opportunities could make all the difference for struggling businesses. You may not be able to directly help with application submissions, but the library needs to know what's available and be able to direct businesses to the right government agency or local economic development organization that's processing those claims. Your existing connections with the following will be invaluable:

- [U.S. Small Business Administration \(SBA\)](#)
- [Service Corps of Retired Executives \(SCORE\)](#)
- [Small Business Development Center \(SBDC\)](#)
- Economic development organizations
- Local government

Business owners will appreciate your efforts to inform the business community of what's available.

Facilities, equipment, and meeting space

For businesses that suddenly lose access to their physical location, whether that be their home, vehicle, or storefront, the library's facilities and technology equipment will be a welcomed resource. Your free internet access, computers, printers, and scanners will be more important than ever as residents submit insurance claims, apply for government relief programs, or search for new employment.

While regular patrons understand the value you bring to the community, the library can reinforce this idea among the wider community by being responsive and compassionate in times of crisis.

[See how](#) Denver Public Library responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Check out COVID-19 resource guides from these libraries:

[Seattle Public Library](#)

[Boston Public Library](#)

[New York Public Library](#)

[San José Public Library](#)

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR BUSINESS PATRONS

While there's no single definition of patrons who need business assistance, there are several categories we can group them into that help illustrate their diverse needs. Not sure how to start a conversation with a new patron? Try: "Tell me about your business."

The budding entrepreneur — While these patrons may or may not have prior business experience in other fields, they probably need help with their business plan and other start-up activities, such as deciding on its organization, filling out paperwork, locating property, or getting funding. They could feel overwhelmed by all the work needed and might expect more from the library than is possible. Library staff should be familiar with services offered by the partners listed on the following pages (see pages 9 through 11), which complement the library's own services. Librarians can't act as consultants, so providing quality research about local competition, demographics, and industries and facilitating connections with other providers is essential.

The experienced business owner — A varied group of patrons, these business owners are often experienced, have owned their business for years, and have an established network of service providers. Unlike with the patron in start-up mode, who is likely to bring specific concerns, you may need to offer your library's services—such as new client leads, SCORE counseling, or online training opportunities for their staff—to get their interest.

The professional employee — These patrons may not own the company they represent, but they make up a significant portion of business professionals in your community. Whether your library is in the city, a suburb, or a sprawling metropolis, there are hundreds of companies that serve your area, each building their book of work and looking for new clients.

DEFINING YOUR SERVICES

Defining what specific services your library can and should provide to businesses and local professionals is as much defined by what *your library* can do as it is by what *other providers* in your community are already doing. If your library decides that outreach to businesses is important, it's critical to survey the current landscape and seek ways to complement existing services or forge partnerships with other providers. This guide provides several big players that likely operate in your state—contacting these organizations is a great first step. Setting boundaries for staff and managing expectations with patrons is just as much a part of working with business professionals as it is with other patrons.

ATTRACTING BUSINESS OWNERS WITH OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

Traditionally, library staff may have sat behind desks and waited for patrons to pose questions. This approach assumed patrons believed the library was useful and that library staff knew how to do specific tasks that were best completed at the library. Because those assumptions aren't as widely held as they once were, we've been tasked with changing our approach. This is where outreach activities become important. Like the activities of a children's department, which likely has been fostering a relationship with local schools for decades, business services must be actively marketed. Unless a professional has had past experience with library staff, they're unlikely to ask for your help.

Outreach activities designed to attract business owners don't need to happen on a weekly basis. Few libraries have the staff or resources to allocate a staff member to be out of the building regularly, which is why fostering solid relationships with other groups in your community is important. If they see demonstrated value, they're almost guaranteed to refer people to you who need something you provide. Like a business with a good reputation, your library will begin to receive referrals from past clients!

Another reason listening to local professionals is important is that they'll probably use jargon unfamiliar to the library field, and how you market your services is critical to the success of your efforts. For example, mentioning that you're available for "bibliographic instruction" won't get as much attention as your "free, personalized lead-generation service." Whether their model is business to business (B2B) or business to consumer (B2C), any client-based business will respond better to the latter. Your marketing approach matters, and you won't be able to effectively promote your service without being mindful of your audience.

Foster the idea that the library is the go-to place for those in need of information, research, meeting space, and other business needs.



The other long-term benefit of actively marketing your services to the local business community is that, over time, it will foster the idea that the library is the go-to place for those in need of information, research, meeting space, and other business needs. As the library becomes more engaged with business activities, and your staff and resources become integrated into decision-making processes, local stakeholders will begin to view the library as a necessity rather than an organization they aged out of. Remaining relevant is critical to your success, and while all effective business relationships take time to develop, the rewards to the organization can be significant. Even a handful of loyal business patrons can effectively help you spread the word about an upcoming program, event, or most importantly, a millage campaign. Consider the influence the president of the chamber of commerce could have if they recorded a persuasive video encouraging people to vote yes because of your efforts!

BROADENING YOUR PATRON BASE

More than other industries, library staff are keenly aware of geographic boundaries and the levels of service they suggest. While we're funded by our user population and provide them with the highest level of access to our most expensive resources (like online content), your outreach to local professionals will be hampered if you're constantly asking people where they live. This might not be an issue if you service a large regional area or county, but if you regularly serve patrons with other "home libraries," consider being as generous as possible with access to the business information they need.

One way to broaden your patron base is to offer library cards with full privileges to all business owners and their employees in your geographic service area, regardless of their home address. If this is a service you already provide, renewing your marketing efforts to local businesses with a simple letter, phone call, or social media post letting them know you offer it could start a conversation about other services.

QUICK START: LOW- AND NO-COST WAYS TO PROVIDE VALUE

1. Offer free access to business equipment and services

Your library probably already provides Wi-Fi, computers, a public printer, photocopier, fax machine, and possibly a digital scanner to the community. If so, market these machines, along with other business services, as new business users are less likely to know you provide them. Video conferencing technology, a 3D printer, or paying for a staff member to be a notary public might also be useful to your community. Offering even a few services at no cost that would otherwise cost businesses money will show the library's commitment to their success.

2. Provide meeting space at no cost

Many professionals travel for work and meet clients in restaurants, coffee shops, and other noisy public places. For professionals who need a quiet space, providing space at no charge that can be scheduled in advance is probably more practical. Walk-in access is useful, but the ability to reserve a room makes more sense for patrons working with clients. If your meeting room policy currently doesn't allow for-profit use of public space, that policy can be rewritten to specify only those activities you deem appropriate (for example, informational seminars rather than sales pitches).

Check out coworking spaces at these libraries:

[Richland Library](#)

[Spokane Library](#)

3. Offer full library privileges to business owners and their employees

This can be a great goodwill step that requires little to no investment. If full access to e-content for a large, unbudgeted group of people is a concern, these resources could be excluded.

4. Host a chamber of commerce meeting

Libraries are great places to host a meeting for your local chamber of commerce. Your welcoming attitude and hospitality, along with the opportunity to mention specific programs or services to a captive audience of professionals, holds incredible value. At the start of the meeting, ask for a show of hands of those who haven't visited before and try to follow up with them during the event. If a networking activity has been planned, consider incorporating one that involves library themes, activities, or services.

5. Judge or host a local business plan competition

If a competition already exists, offer the library's help with the research and judging parts of the event. Research is critical to a good business plan—and research is what libraries do best! It's possible the event organizers aren't aware of what you bring to the table. If there isn't an event near you, creating and hosting the first competition in your area, and asking local business owners to act as judges, is a great way to foster a meaningful relationship and encourages them to view the library as a place where entrepreneurship is supported.

Check out:

[Brooklyn Public Library's competition](#)

[Naperville Public Library's official rules and judging criteria](#)

6. Start a meetup group

If your community doesn't have a platform for business owners and other professionals to network and learn from one another, or there's a need for a new group focused on specific business needs, consider using [meetup.com](#) to organize your events. Your library event calendar might also work well, as would a new Facebook group and/or event.

Check out the meetup groups at these libraries:

[Toronto Public Library](#)

[West Asheville Public Library](#)

7. Invite a local expert to take part in a library program

Your community is filled with people who are experts at what they do. Consider tapping this wealth of knowledge to support your library programming. Certified public accountants can discuss business taxes; financial advisors can talk to adults and children during Money Smart Week; and experienced Etsy and eBay sellers can introduce patrons to selling online. There are endless opportunities to incorporate local professionals, each structured in an informational rather than sales format. Before you introduce the speaker, be sure to plug your latest business services, and offer business cards to interested patrons.

8. Provide 1-on-1 business consultations

Everyone appreciates specialized, personalized service. If your library finds that walk-in requests for business information are disruptive to workflows because of the time needed to do the research, consider offering this service by appointment, phone, or email only. Since these requests are often more involved, taking notes during a phone call or asking the business owner to email you details can be a time-saver for the librarian and patron. This way, the patron didn't make an unnecessary trip to watch you do research, and the staff member didn't feel pressured to find the quickest answer. While library staff are accustomed to stopping tasks to take care of patron needs, your time is valuable. A business owner will understand that you need time to consider their needs and will be in touch to discuss findings.

Check out the [Book-a-Librarian services at these libraries:](#)

[Public Library of Youngstown & Mahoning County](#)

[Sno-Isle Libraries](#)

PARTNERS FOR SUCCESS: BUSINESS SERVICE PROVIDERS

As you consider providing services to businesses and begin to look for partners in your community, you may feel like you'd be competing with existing organizations who seem to know better than library staff. The idea is to complement, not compete, with these groups. Libraries make excellent partners for the organizations below because we're:

- Respected places of information sharing and community connection, and can bring attention to the work of these organizations
- Information professionals and expert researchers, who locate obscure information every day

Business research can be time-consuming, and existing business service organizations in your area might be grateful that they have a partner in the library to refer their clients to.

Local government

When entrepreneurs look for help online, they often check with their local government for direction. While the library is probably already mentioned as a resource, a list of specific services the library provides to business owners and new entrepreneurs—in a business-specific area—will help increase your visibility. Also, consider targeting local economic development and downtown development agencies as you market your services. These organizations have extensive local and state contacts and may be looking for partnerships to increase awareness of their services or collect public feedback.

Check out these partnerships:

[Dallas B.R.A.I.N.](#)

[Montgomery County, MD](#)

Chamber of commerce

A chamber of commerce is a top local organization that prospective business owners call with questions, so you'll want them to be familiar with your library's services. If your library hasn't yet had direct contact with chamber staff, consider reaching out and scheduling a casual meeting to discuss ways the library could support its mission and goals. Chambers are made up of the chamber's staff, a board of directors, a group of chamber ambassadors, and potentially several other business networking groups. Most chambers provide networking opportunities throughout the year that a library staff member could attend. The best way to learn about the needs of the business community is to go to these types of community events.

Business networking groups

Such groups may be associated with [Business Network International \(BNI\)](#) or a chamber. They're membership-based small groups dedicated to networking and providing referrals to one another. Each member of a group is usually from a different industry, and members are expected to refer exclusively to other members.

[Check out](#) an SBA guide to growing a business with referral/network groups.

[U.S. Small Business Administration \(SBA\)](#) — The SBA's job is to provide services to, and back the financing of loans for, businesses across the country. While this federal agency is headquartered in Washington, D.C., it also operates offices in each state and provides funding for other service providers mentioned in this section. The SBA's website provides a considerable amount of information your patrons might find useful, including a business plan guide; legal, government contracting; import-export information; and ongoing online learning opportunities on relevant topics. As an information provider, consider becoming familiar with their site and registering for their email updates for your area, which will include any upcoming events. The SBA might also be interested in hosting an event in your library, which would attract patrons who might not otherwise use it.

[Veteran Business Outreach Centers \(VBOCs\)](#) — Divided into 10 regions across the United States, these SBA-funded centers focus on business help for veterans and their families. While each center likely covers several states, they offer local programs in their region and may appreciate the library hosting an event in your area. VBOCs cover a large region, so they'll also appreciate library staff providing local research assistance to their clients. Whether by the SBA directly or a VBOC, an SBA-funded event is a great way to market to the local business community.

[Service Corps of Retired Executives \(SCORE\)](#) — This all-volunteer-run organization, partially funded by the SBA, operates across the country, with many states having numerous chapters. SCORE provides free, one-on-one business counseling with mentors on an appointment basis. It also offers a variety of free or low-cost programs on various business topics, which are organized by each chapter. Many libraries are host locations for monthly SCORE meetings. SCORE mentors are excellent subject experts who could speak at your library, while also promoting their free services and helping to build your library's reputation among local entrepreneurs.

[Small Business Development Center \(SBDC\)](#) — Operating in each state and also partially funded by the SBA, each SBDC office provides free counseling, free or low-cost seminars and workshops, and business plan assistance. The SBDC publishes a how-to guide on starting a business, which covers every aspect of the start-up process. If you encounter patrons who are at the idea stage of their future business, encouraging them to take a “how to start a business” class by SBDC is a great first step. The SBDC office will appreciate the referral and will likely reply in kind when their clients need help with research.

[Check out](#) this sample start-up guide.

In addition to their programs and services, the SBDC certifies business resources centers across the country, and many libraries participate in this program. Becoming certified doesn't require a big monetary investment, and the person designated as the business contact doesn't need to be a business librarian. Once certified, your library will appear in the SBDC network when businesses search for assistance online.

Local and state economic development organizations — Usually larger in scope and budget than a local chamber of commerce, economic development organizations focus on regional business issues and attracting new companies to their area with programs, funding, and site selection. If you work near one of these organizations, don't hesitate to let them know the business services in your area that would help them positively pitch your community.

Check out these organizations:

[Indiana Economic Development Corp](#)

[New Jersey Economic Development Authority](#)

[U.S. Economic Development Administration](#)

Business incubators and accelerators — Similar to, and sometimes operating in conjunction with, economic development organizations, incubators and accelerators help new and existing business owners with planning, funding, expansion, and networking. While some may permit all entrepreneurs to access their services, businesses may need to apply to gain access to industry-specific programs. Check the [International Business Innovation Association](#) for organizations in your area.

Check out:

[Ann Arbor SPARK](#)

[Youngstown Business Incubator](#)

Other service organizations — While service and civic organizations, such as Kiwanis International, Knights of Columbus, Optimist International, Rotary International, Lions Clubs International, and League of Women Voters, aren't focused on services to businesses, their ranks are filled with local business professionals. If your library isn't already involved with one or more of these groups, consider joining and attending a meeting to network, or provide a member of the library's staff to be a speaker.

LEARN BY DOING: BUSINESS REFERENCE SERVICES

For library staff new to business reference, the potential of being asked about a topic completely foreign to them might be uncomfortable, but even experienced business librarians working for large universities are asked such questions. Consider business-related questions opportunities for professional development. Unlike more general reference requests, questions posed by business owners may not be quickly researched and answered. You'll probably find yourself taking notes and letting your patrons know you'll get back to them in a day or two. Some business patrons might expect an immediate answer, but business reference is more about finding the *right* answer rather than the *quickest* answer. Most library users don't fully understand how information is gathered, collected, organized, or made available—and business patrons are no exception. Clearly explaining what you need to research or who you need to consult while managing their expectations, will help your patron understand the complexity of their request if you need time to do research.

If you're feeling overwhelmed with business jargon and the research aspect, [read the small business research guide](#) created by members of the Business Reference and Services Section of the American Library Association. Contact information for the guides' authors are provided, if you have questions.

Existing Library Business Services — You don't need to reinvent the wheel as you learn business reference. For decades, public and university business librarians have been collecting data sources and making them available online. University library websites usually have a library guide dedicated to business data sources for students.



Check out the guides at these universities:

[Ohio University](#)

[University of Florida](#)

Check out programs at these libraries:

[Brooklyn Public Library](#)

[Broward County Library](#)

[Charleston County Public Library](#)

[Free Library of Philadelphia](#)

[Grand Rapids Public Library](#)

[Laramie County Library](#)

[Mid-Continent Public Library](#)

[Milwaukee Public Library](#)

[Phoenix Public Library](#)

[Tulsa City-County Library](#)

BUSLIB-L Listserv — There’s a lot to be learned from the questions posed to librarians across the United States and beyond. If you plan on being the point person for business services at your library, joining the BUSLIB-L listserv will be useful if you need help locating information.

[Subscribe](#) to the BUSLIB-L listserv.

Check out these books:

- [Embedded Business Librarianship for the Public Librarian](#) (Barbara A. Alvarez, ALA, 2016)
- [Making Sense of Business Reference: A Guide for Librarians and Research Professionals](#) (Celia Ross, ALA, 2019)
- [Small Business and the Public Library: Strategies for a Successful Partnership](#) (Luise Weiss, Sophia Serlis-McPhillips, and Elizabeth Malafi, ALA, 2011)

PLACES TO LOCATE BUSINESS INFORMATION

Lead generation, finding new clients, locating competition — Directory databases have been around for decades, so there’s a good chance you have access to [Data Axle Reference Solutions](#) (formerly ReferenceUSA), [AtoZdatabases](#), [Gale Business: DemographicsNow](#), [Mergent Intellect](#), or [Gale Directory Library](#). Familiarizing yourself with the [North American Industry Classification System](#) (NAICS) and [Standard Industrial Classification](#) (SIC) system will help narrow businesses by what they do, rather than by their name. Offering lists of new businesses and new homeowners is especially valuable to many client-based businesses. If your existing subscription doesn’t offer these datasets, ask your rep about adding them.

Industry reports and SWOT analysis — There are a large number of data suppliers who offer industry reports to the library market, including [IBIS](#), [First Research](#) (via D&B Hoovers), [Euromonitor](#), [SBDCNet](#), [Gale eBooks](#), [Plunkett Research](#), and EBSCO’s [Business Source Complete](#), to name a few. Particularly useful for patrons writing their business plan, consultants in your area will also find them useful. [Gale eBooks](#) offers digital content, such as the [Encyclopedia of American Industries](#) series, which contain outlines of existing and emerging markets.

If a library subscription isn’t in your budget, consider using [SBDCNet](#), which offers hundreds of industry reports for free. When an entrepreneur is applying for a business loan, it’s important that the business plan cite as many reputable sources as possible.

[The Census Bureau’s Economic Census](#) is performed every five years, and the government’s official count of employer businesses is available to review two years later. Separate nonemployer business datasets are also produced. This data can be used to track national and state-specific industry stats over time, including:

- Number of firms
- Sales revenue
- Payroll
- Number of employees

SWOT analysis — Analyzing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of a particular industry or company is another request you may receive. You'll sometimes find specific SWOT reports within one of the resources mentioned on the previous page, but more often than not, your patrons will need to review the industry reports and make those determinations themselves.

Market research — The process of determining who their target customer will be and checking the landscape for information about that customer is something every responsible business owner needs to do. If you can't subscribe to a database such as [Gale Business: DemographicsNow](#), which simplifies locating this information, helping the patron navigate the Census website will be appreciated.

Another element of market research is figuring out the size of the market for a particular product or service. This information can be obtained from the [Consumer Expenditure Survey](#) (CE), which is conducted by the Census Bureau, and available via [Gale Business: DemographicsNow](#), which formats the data into a more easily accessible interface. A simplistic way to calculate the market for a product or service is to first locate the amount spent on it per household (from the CEX or *DemographicsNow*) and multiply that by the number of households in the geographic region. Because the calculation is based on hard data, it can be used in a business plan to justify that the product or service is needed.

Business plan assistance — The SBA, SBDC, SCORE, [Bplans](#), [Gale Business: Plan Builder](#), and [Gale Business: Entrepreneurship](#) all offer in-person or online business plan assistance. The business plan is another element that doesn't necessarily need to be reinvented to be useful. While there are new formats—such as the Lean Business Plan model—that are effective, the nearly 1,000 sample plans in Gale's *Entrepreneurship* resource (which includes digital copies of the popular [Business Plans Handbook](#)) are excellent formats to follow.

Funding sources and grants — As a general rule, grants aren't available to for-profit enterprises, and the federal government doesn't directly provide funding to start businesses—although you may have patrons emphatically state otherwise! Instead, the federal government guarantees, or backs, loans provided by local financial institutions, most commonly the 7(a) loan. That said, your local SBA or SBDC office may be aware of microloans or other small grants that are available locally.

[Find more information](#) on the 7(a) loan program.

Continuing education for owners and staff — Subscriptions to [Gale Presents: Udemy](#), [LinkedIn Learning](#) (formerly Lynda.com), [Tutor.com](#), [Mango Languages](#), and [Gale Courses](#) are becoming more common in public libraries. If you offer these services and provide access to the business community, let them know. They might find these services useful for themselves or their staff.

Locating business forms and instructions — While we can't complete or submit forms for patrons, we're often asked for the necessary paperwork to do many different tasks. Your state's corporation or business licensing department provides all LLC, corporation, and partnership forms needed to become a legal entity. [Gale LegalForms](#) and EBSCO's [Legal Information Reference Center](#) are also useful for other legal issues your patrons may encounter.

BUSINESS PROGRAMMING IDEAS

Directory databases as lead generators — You might consider offering a straightforward, 30–45-minute instructional session on how business owners and professionals can pull targeted lists of new and existing businesses and homeowners on an ongoing basis.

You can use:

- [Data Axle Reference Solutions](#)
- [Gale Business: DemographicsNow](#)
- [AtoZdatabases](#)
- [Mergent Intellect](#)

Small business legal assistance — This is a good opportunity to tap the expertise of local bar associations. Some county or state associations have a speaker's bureau, where attorneys present on a number of legal topics at no charge. Request a business attorney and invite local groups, including chamber members.

Business plan assistance — If your area has high start-up activity, host an event geared to writing a business plan or that discusses best practices. This program is best done in conjunction with another service provider, such as SCORE or SBDC, as they'll help you market the event. Library staff can focus on resources for market and industry research during the event.

Market research 101 — A market research program can be done solely by library staff with great research skills who can focus on tasks such as locating demographics, consumer spending, census data, and other local points of interest for entrepreneurs in the process of writing their business plan or planning an expansion into an unknown area.

Industry research 101 — An industry research program could be combined with a market research class or taught alone, depending on the databases available. This class could focus on finding local, state, and national industry information via subscription or free online resources. Discuss NAICS and SIC codes, industry reports available by subscription or from SBDC, and industry or association websites.

Locate your competition/SWOT analysis — This class could focus on locating specific businesses in a desired area or mapping specific industries to look for underserved areas. Use directory databases and any other resource that provides industry articles or prepackaged SWOT reports, such as those found in EBSCO's [Business Source Ultimate](#) or [Gale Business Insights: Global](#).

Market your business online — This is a huge program subject area. You could host or lead programs on:

- Website design
- Podcasting
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Snapchat
- LinkedIn

Businesses looking to integrate their social media accounts and schedule posts in advance would benefit from information about services such as:

- [Hootsuite](#)
- [Agorapulse](#)
- [Buffer](#)
- [Sendible](#)

While your library's marketing department has the expertise to lead some of these programs, consider asking local marketing businesses in your chamber to lead classes.

Résumé and cover letter workshop or local job fair — Held jointly or separately, this type of event is another great way to foster relationships with local companies. If a library staff member isn't comfortable providing guidelines for résumés or cover letters, ask your local career services company to lead the discussion. Reserve your computer lab and transform a lecture into a hands-on workshop so patrons leave with something accomplished. The online resource [Gale Presents: Peterson's Career Prep](#) offers a VisualCV Résumé Creator.

On-site events with the SBA, SBDC, SCORE, or chamber of commerce — Any event that the SBA, SBDC, or SCORE hosts at your library would be an asset to your growing business services. They provide networking opportunities for library staff and offer an opportunity for you to promote what you do that supports their business goals.

Library business programming in action:

[Cecil County Public Library](#)

[Mid-Continent Public Library](#)

[Middle Country Public Library](#)

[Naperville Public Library](#)

[Phoenix Public Library](#)

[St. Louis County Library](#)

INDUSTRY-LED INITIATIVES

Leading library organizations recognize the role public libraries can and should play in assisting small business success, particularly for underserved populations, and have provided guidance and frameworks that can be leveraged in varying degrees by libraries across the U.S.

Check out these important projects:

Urban Libraries Council [Strengthening Libraries as Entrepreneurial Hubs](#)

American Library Association (ALA) [Libraries Build Business](#)

GETTING STARTED: REFLECTIONS FROM A PRO

You don't need an MBA to successfully create library services and programs to support your local business community. There are many ways your library can support businesses right now—without additional staff or funding. Get started and see what needs arise and how you can help. Here's how Naperville Public Library's Business Librarian, Kent Palmer, reflects on the first five years of [NaperLaunch](#) and his advice for staff new to business services:

“Someone taking on this responsibility should just get started. . . . Hold programs and workshops and [identify] resources that specifically support entrepreneurs and connect with a service provided, such as SCORE or SBDC, that will help connect you with . . . program presenters. If you're the person tasked with business research, I recommend that you attend the very programs you schedule and learn alongside your patrons. Over time, you'll build a robust program covering all aspects of entrepreneurship, and you'll soon become informed and, in some cases, an expert in some areas discussed. . . . Most of what I know about entrepreneurship, I have learned here at NaperLaunch by attending our workshops. Truthfully, I have learned much more by being in these workshops. . . . That's the best way to learn.

Five years since starting up, NaperLaunch is recognized in our community as the center of new start-up activity. We serviced over 1,700 entrepreneurs last year, and that number has been exceeded this year already. The chamber of commerce, the city council, [and] the Naperville Development Partnership all recognize NaperLaunch as the place to send new entrepreneurs; we are a net contributor to the economic development in our community.”

Set your library apart and start a conversation with a local business today!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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In 2012, Winn became the business librarian in a large public library system and learned how to do business research and outreach while on the job with the help of local business support organizations and fellow business librarians in Michigan. He has master's degrees from Indiana University and Boston University, but no MBA.



ABOUT GALE

We believe that libraries are the heart of the community. We hope to strengthen the connections you've made by offering resources that can assist people at every stage of life. That includes supporting workforce development, providing adult learning opportunities, contributing to small business success, and creating focused programming for topics that matter most, such as equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives.

1. U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy, 2020 [Small Business Profile](#).
2. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics Annual Report, [Digest of Education Statistics](#), 2019.
3. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics Annual Report, [Digest of Education Statistics](#), 2013.