Streamline City Regulations and Inspection Processes

Streamlining regulations and the inspections process - and also making this information more transparent – will help support local businesses.

New York City developed a website called NYC Business Express, which helps make permit and licensing requirements easier to understand through the use of “starter guide” infographics. Through the NYC Business Acceleration Program, the city also coordinates inspections among various agencies in order to reduce the amount of time it takes for businesses to receive certifications.

New York City: NYC Business Express & NYC Business Acceleration

NYC is working to make it easier for businesses to understand and comply with law, using a variety of interagency initiatives.

One aspect of this program is the website NYC.gov/Business. Because good regulations and incentives only work well when businesses know about them, we work to better explain existing rules. Entrepreneurs can search online “Starter Guides” and find a list of their opening requirements [example below]. Existing business owners can find a dashboard of their upcoming license renewal dates. Just as the navigation is more fluid, the end point is more robust. Over 1,000 rules, regulations, and programs are explained clearly on consistent pages with agency-supported content.

In addition, NYC Business Acceleration assists individuals and groups opening new, primarily food and beverage, establishments with navigating city agency processes and reducing the time needed to open. NYC Business Acceleration provides client management services, an accelerated plan review process, pre-inspection site consultations and coordination of necessary inspections by regulatory agencies. Because of innovations like data exchanges and coordinated inspections, business owners can save an average of 2.5 months in opening while increasing their compliance rates with health rules.

Businesses do better when they know about regulations and can plan for them. Communities thrive when entrepreneurs can open their doors quickly thanks to access to resources and good customer service from their city.

Chicago has streamlined regulations and inspections for all types of businesses (see info on Small Business Center and Express Lane above), but the first area to be reformed was the restaurant industry. The city’s Restaurant Start-Up Program has taken a client-based approach to serving new restaurants since 2012. Key tenets of the program are coordinating inspections, streamlining application processes, and prioritizing zoning and location issues to minimize the need for costly adjustments later in the process.
Chicago: Restaurant Start-Up Program

Restaurants are a leading job creator in Chicago, responsible for nearly 10 percent of jobs in the city. However, they face a harsh reality of razor-thin profit margins, and many fail within their first year in business. In June 2012, Chicago announced the Restaurant Start-up Program to ensure that the city is a partner and resource for restaurants, not an obstacle. Since its launch, the program has helped over 1,000 restaurants open their doors quickly, reducing time to open by as much as 50%, and putting more dollars in the restaurant owners’ pockets.

The success of the program lies in the restaurant community’s participation in the development of the program. At more than a dozen roundtable meetings, the restaurant community identified pain points in the city process and ways that the city can improve. Based on this feedback from the restaurant community, the city tailored its program to address those issues. The program includes the following reforms:

Streamlines the application process to allow both building permit and license application processes to begin concurrently
Uses a client-based approach to walk restaurant owners through every step of the process to obtain a license
Ensures that restaurants undergo the necessary zoning and location reviews up front, minimizing the risk that owners will need to make expensive course corrections
Reduces the number of inspection visits for new restaurants through a team-based inspection approach
Helps restaurants pass their inspections the first time by providing them with pre-inspection consultations and a comprehensive start-up guide (see www.cityofchicago.org/restaurant)

The restaurant community is thrilled with the success of the Restaurant Start-up Program in reducing the time it takes to open a new restaurant. They are particularly pleased to see that the inspections are more transparent and consistent, and as a result, they are more prepared for inspections. The program improved the health inspection pass rate by nearly 66%.

Chicago incorporated the success and lessons learned from the Restaurant Start-up Program into its Small Business Center which was launched in March of 2013 to help businesses in every industry.

Help Small Businesses Build a Web Presence

A strong online presence is a key factor in a small business’ ability to engage customers and attract new business. According to a LinkedIn study, 81 percent of small and medium sized businesses use social media in some capacity.11

City leaders can play a role in helping their small business owners learn how to use the internet and social media for marketing. One example would be providing training for their small businesses so they not only create a website, but they learn how to show up in online search engines.