Helping Small Businesses Grow Online

E-commerce has accounted for a continually growing share of the retail market since the early 2000s, and this growth accelerated in 2020 when the pandemic forced physical stores to temporarily close. The rise of e-commerce means consumers have more choices than ever. Their options now extend beyond their neighborhood or city to products from around the world, delivered right to their doors. The lines between e-commerce and in-person retail continue to blur as omnichannel retail becomes increasingly prevalent.[1] This shift can be challenging for many small businesses.

Brick-and-mortar establishments typically experience additional costs, considerations, and effort when adding digital sales to their business portfolio. Technology, shipping, and storage needs can be complicating factors. At the same time, having a growing number of options for selling digitally, physically or a combination of both, can help more businesses thrive. Cities can strengthen retail by connecting small business owners and entrepreneurs with resources that help them capitalize on the digital retail environment.

The Strategy

Municipalities can support small businesses in pursuing digital sales and marketing in several ways. They can provide support within city government or partner with other organizations to provide this support. This may include services that help small businesses:

Create a website or improve existing web presence

Use social media more effectively

Update listings on Google Maps, Yelp, and other review platforms

Register with online sales platforms or third-party delivery services

Many municipalities have resources available for entrepreneurs as they get ready to launch a business. Cities with these resources can look into adding a section with information on web presence and digital marketing. Municipalities can also connect local business owners with resources that will help them capitalize on digital sales. Libraries, BIDs (Business Improvement Districts), chambers of commerce and community redevelopment agencies are all potential partners who can help provide these services.

This brief was made in collaboration with Julia Glickman & Safaya Fawzi.

BENEFITS OF THIS STRATEGY:

Expand the customer base of existing small businesses and help these businesses thrive by utilizing every tool available to them.

Provide an innovative way for cities to support their small businesses.

Increase capital in the community, as small business dollars circulate and stay within a community more than big box or other larger online retailers.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

1 **Who are the best partners for this work?** Existing organizations that are offering technical support can be great partners, along with business associations.

2 **How can the municipality provide lasting support that will enable businesses to maintain their online presence?** As technology changes, the needs of businesses will evolve. Consider how the city can be flexible to meet those changing needs.

3 **How much support is the municipality able to provide?** The city should devote resources based on what services are most needed by the businesses in your municipality.

Using Digital Marketing to Support Local Businesses in Miami, FL 🗺️

The City of Miami has developed a digital platform, Buy Miami, to promote local small businesses and attract customers. This city-wide tool offers free advertising for businesses and provides discounts to encourage customer engagement, all at no cost to the participating businesses.[2] The goal of this program is to generate more revenue for local businesses by encouraging residents and visitors to visit those businesses. The City encourages businesses to offer a deal that can be promoted on the Buy Miami platform. Businesses can register with the program through an online submission, and then are asked to provide feedback to the City on their experience. The Buy Miami platform gives visitors a way to learn about local businesses, and helps those businesses thrive.

To read more examples of how cities have helped local businesses grow online, check out the report **"Future of Cities: Adapting to Changes in the Retail Landscape"**

1   Glickman, J., Pine, J., & Geraghty, L. (2023). Adapting to Changes in the Retail Landscape. National League of Cities. https://www.nlc.org/resource/future-of-cities-adapting-to-changes-in-the-retail-landscape/

2   City of Miami. (n.d.) Buy Miami. https://www.miami.gov/Government/Buy-Miami