



4 tips to help keep small businesses strong

(BPT) - Over the past year, small businesses have had to adapt, often learning that their bonds with their surrounding communities are crucial to their survival. As your business continues to weather today's challenges, here are tips to help your business stay strong while you stay connected to your customers - and your neighbors.

Know your customers

Ask your customers, employees and community members for their opinions on your products and services and discover what they want. Free and low-cost tools like SurveyMonkey can help you create a professional-looking online survey. A low-cost customer relationship management (CRM) tool can also help you stay connected to your customers.

Leverage digital marketing

Did you know 81% of Americans use YouTube¹, 69% use Facebook and 40% use Instagram? In addition, 60% of consumers say they will continue shopping online, with 26% saying they will shop online even more in the future.²

Meet customers where they are by posting and advertising on these powerful digital platforms. Create email campaigns to contact customers. If you don't have a website, make one. Inexpensive tools like Wix or GoDaddy can help you build a basic site quickly.

Support your community

Stay engaged with your community by sponsoring youth teams or holding food drives at your location. Be visible and be a good neighbor.

Find funding to fuel growth

Money is available for small businesses, if you know where to look. Grants, loans and awards can help your business grow. Start with the Small Business Administration and U.S. Chamber of Commerce. You can also try a simple online search for "small business grants."

Many corporations offer awards programs. For example, since 2016 the Synchrony Pillars Project has honored small business leaders who support their communities. In 2020, the program recognized 20 winners for supporting their communities in innovative, powerful ways. Each of the winners received a \$10,000 prize. Here are a few highlights from a sampling of the winners:

* All About Automotive, an automotive repair facility servicing foreign and domestic vehicles in Gresham, Oregon. During the pandemic, the husband-and-wife-owned company created a Pay It Forward Campaign for those suffering financially. Customers, friends and family donated to help pay for parts, and All About Automotive matched the donations with free labor. All About Automotive is investing their award into equipment for their shop and the Pay it Forward Campaign.

* American Mattress, a local premium mattress and bedding retailer in Colorado Springs, Colo. Since opening its first store in 2017, the family-run and veteran-operated business has been passionate about giving back to the community. They first donated beds to an organization housing homeless mothers with children. Despite needing to close two months during the pandemic, the business continued supporting the community by donating beds to foster parents and shelters. The award money has helped American Mattress invest in inventory, which it continues to allocate to the community.

* Backstage Music in Starkville, Miss., has been North Mississippi's premier music store since 1978. However, it does much more than sell guitars and basses. The owners created the go-to audio/video business for local governments, churches, restaurants and schools. When the pandemic forced it to close, Backstage Music developed solutions for local organizations suddenly needing live streaming. In addition to seeking ways to support music and music education, the business collects food for local food pantries (bring five food items, get a free guitar restring job), and hopes to match donations using the award money.

* Valdosta Properties, a property management business in Houston, Texas. Being led by an African-American woman in an industry men dominate makes this business unique and challenging. The pandemic forced them to adapt, because of their direct contact with customers. The team has gone above and beyond to assure customers they can complete remodeling projects safely, with care and respect for their health. A community-oriented business, Valdosta Properties chose to use half the award money for a marketing campaign called "Are You Ready?" which aims to provide generators for senior citizens' homes.

Learn more about the Pillars awards and last year's winners at [Synchrony.com/smallbusiness](https://www.synchrony.com/smallbusiness).

With an approach fostering stronger relationships within the community, small businesses can continue to survive - and even thrive - during difficult times, whatever the future holds.

1 PEW Research Center, April 2021 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>).

2 Synchrony Consumer Sentiment Monthly Tracking Survey N=1000 U.S. Consumers - Feb 2021.

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