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Pivoting during a pandemic

April 29, 2020

How Georgia Southern's Business Innovation Group is providing resources to small businesses during the COVID-19 crisis



An employee at Rolling Monkey Ice Cream in Statesboro fulfills a curbside customer order.

The past two months haven't exactly been business as usual for Georgia Southern University alumnus and small business owner Garrett Clark.

As the owner of Rolling Monkey Ice Cream in Statesboro, Georgia, Clark has had to make several shifts in his business due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused restaurants and eateries to discontinue dine-in services for an extended time.

Thanks to guidance and interactions with fellow business owners through the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at Georgia Southern's Business Innovation Group (BIG) in downtown Statesboro, he was able to pivot a little more quickly.

"We transitioned to a curbside approach, which currently is 50 percent of our revenue," Clark said.

"Conversations within the Business Innovation Group led us to the curbside idea, and due to implementing this pivot in a timely manner, we haven't had to lay off any employees."

Clark is just one of many small businesses that have been able to rely more than ever on BIG and the SBDC, which offer guidance, resources, physical office and meeting spaces, among other services, to businesses year-round.

Dominique Halaby, DPA, director of BIG, said the SBDC is making sure their clients and local businesses have access to resources available to them during the COVID-19 pandemic. During these uncertain times and in an effort to help area business owners and community leaders, BIG has compiled a list of resources regarding the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Stimulus (CARES) Act, along with other helpful tips.

“The COVID-19 pandemic is touching all of us, just not in the same way,” said Halaby. “We want to make sure our area business owners and community leaders have all the information, resources and support they need to make informed decisions about how best to respond to and emerge from this economic crisis.”

While Clark has been a client of BIG and the SBDC for some time, he feels especially grateful to have them as resources during a time such as this. Through information provided by the SBDC, he was notified of the small business disaster loans the government recently released almost as soon as they were available.



Garrett Clark uses office space at the Business Innovation Group's downtown Statesboro location.

“The PPP —the payment protection plan that’s being rolled out— is a very beneficial loan that helps us with our biggest expense, which is payroll,” Clark said. “If we weren’t in that space, I don’t think that we would have been made aware of it in time to effectively populate the application and secure our placement in line to receive funding.”

Halaby said BIG is dedicated to ensuring business owners fully understand the CARES Act.

“For example, our SBDC is making virtual appointments and conducting webinars to help small business owners understand and apply for available funds to help them through the crisis,” he

said.

In addition, BIG wanted to gain a broader understanding of how social distancing measures and COVID-19 are impacting businesses in the region. The University’s Center for Business Analytics and Economic Research (CBAER), which is housed at BIG, conducted a survey of more than 500 respondents. The survey asked businesses about the recent changes in their operations and procedures after social distancing guidelines were implemented in March.

The survey garnered respondents from 16 counties throughout South and Coastal Georgia. On the positive side, of the businesses that have remained open, nearly 40% of them have encouraged employees to work from home while nearly two-thirds are implementing social distancing guidelines in the workplace.

On the downside, nearly 54% of businesses have reduced the ordering and purchasing of supplies, 23% of businesses have furloughed employees while an additional 28% have reduced staffing levels.

In the industries that are important to the Coastal Georgia economy, 46.9% of responses to laying off employees and 47.9% of responses about furloughing employees came from restaurants, hospitality and tourism.

Looking forward, survey respondents are optimistic about their business operations in the next three months. More than 46% of respondents believe business volume will increase, and 45% of respondents believe sales will increase as well. Nearly a third of respondents said their business financial health and profitability will improve in three months while almost a quarter of businesses said their hiring and employment outlook will improve.

Clark agrees.

“While we may not enjoy what we’re going through right now, I think this is going to make us more resilient in the future,” he said. “We’re stressed, but because of that, we’re going to build back stronger.”

Additional resources for small businesses can be found at GeorgiaSouthern.edu/parker/big/covid-19. The complete results of the survey can be found at GeorgiaSouthern.edu/parker/big.

The Business Innovation Group, a center of the Parker College of Business, houses the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at Georgia Southern University, the Center for Business Analytics and Economic Research (CBAER), the EDA University Center, the FabLab and the Innovation Incubator. BIG’s focus is to provide students and the community with the skills, training and resources needed to successfully launch and maintain sound business practices.

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