

Tech volunteers save the day for small retailers

By **Nancy Lavin** - August 21, 2020 3:31 am



SALES BOOST: Lori Lyons, owner of Beauty and the Bath in North Kingstown, says after boosting the online presence of her gift store as a result of participating in the R.I. Commerce Corp.'s Small Business Technical Support program, she's expanded the reach of her business and increased her sales by 25%. / PBN PHOTO/ELIZABETH GRAHAM

Lori Lyons spent the first 48 hours after the state issued stay-at-home orders in a sleepless haze of research into how to transform her brick-and-mortar store into an online retailer.

The longtime small-business owner already had an e-commerce site using the Shopify platform for her [North Kingstown](#) gift store, Beauty and the Bath. But with most of her business stemming from loyal customers and passersby, online sales took a back seat.

Then, COVID-19 hit, and Lyons realized she needed to understand the ins and outs of e-commerce fast if her shop had any chance at survival. Scared and anxious, she logged long hours on her computer, and even more time on hold with customer service for the Canadian-based e-commerce platform.

"Of course, you were on hold forever because the whole country was trying to call in," Lyons said. "I would try to call in the middle of the night when it was less busy and just put the phone on speaker and wait."

After a grueling two days, she was able to successfully ramp up her e-commerce site on her own. But when it came to finding online customers to buy the candles, pajamas and doughnut-shaped pool floats, she needed more help.

Enter [R.I. Commerce Corp.](#)'s Small Business Technical Support program, created in partnership with District Hall Providence. The program launched in response to the flood of calls to the state's small-business help line from business owners such as Lyons, seeking guidance on everything from e-commerce to social media, digital marketing and even just setting up remote connections for at-

home workers, according to Siu-Li Khoe, vice president of business development for [R.I. Commerce](#).

'I don't know the back-ends of websites and search engines.'
LORI LYONS, Beauty and the Bath owner

Modeled after Apple Inc.'s Genius Bar service, the program let small businesses sign up for free Zoom appointments with volunteer experts on all things technology. Since starting in late March, the program has helped more than 300 businesses, amassing a 50-person-strong volunteer base of experts, according to [R.I. Commerce](#).

Lyons was an early participant. Unlike those hours spent on hold with a New Zealand-based customer support number, her experience with the [R.I. Commerce](#) program was painless and easily accessible. She was quickly paired with a volunteer expert for what became a series of Zoom calls discussing Google Analytics and search engine optimization. That the advice she received was distilled into layperson terms was also important, Lyons said.

"I don't know the back-ends of websites and search engines," she said. "I am a shopkeeper."

Creating a welcoming and trusting relationship between business owners and volunteer experts was a focus of the program, Khoe said, noting the trepidation some might feel about asking for technical assistance.

Indeed, a 2019 report by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Technology Engagement Center indicated that nearly three-quarters of the state's small businesses were unfamiliar with digital tools such as digital marketing and online payment services. [Social Enterprise Greenhouse](#), which has been working with [R.I. Commerce](#) and other partners to distribute donated laptops from Microsoft Corp., encountered many business owners whose needs were even more basic – some just needed help learning to use a laptop, said Jessica Vega, SEG's program director for its Central Falls/Pawtucket Program.



GIVEN A HAND: Beauty and the Bath owner Lori Lyons says she found R.I. Commerce Corp.'s Small Business Technical Support program helpful and easily accessible. / PBN PHOTO/ELIZABETH GRAHAM

Kerri Gaffett was, by her own description, among those without much tech-savvy. A former general contractor turned psychotherapist, she had only a rudimentary website for her [Block Island](#)-based coffee-bean-distribution business prior to the start of the pandemic, making most of her sales through local farmers markets. She had an Instagram account but didn't use it.

Early sessions through the tech support program focused on basic explanations and defining terms, Gaffett said. But now, [Block Island Coffee LLC](#) has a new website and e-commerce platform, a burgeoning social media presence and the sales numbers to match.

"It was either sink or swim," she said. "Moving to an online presence has been our water wings."

And even business owners with ample technology know-how benefited from the program.

Kerlyne Jean-Baptiste started her natural hair care products venture KerlyGirl online and had a well-established e-commerce platform prior to the pandemic.

But as a solo entrepreneur, and a young one – Jean-Baptiste is 25 – she valued the wisdom and manpower she gained through sessions with a team of expert volunteers.

Reflecting on what she described as a "season of growth," prompted in part by new attention on supporting Black-owned businesses, Jean-Baptiste said she would not have been able to keep up with demand had it not been for the support and guidance she received through the program.

Lyons, too, said that boosting her online presence as a result of the program has created a 25% increase in sales, expanding the reach of her business.

"My business now kind of has two faces," she said. "There's the store, and experience of Wickford Village and its charm. And then my products online, which is a whole other thing that's really taken off."

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