

YMCA MARKHAM BUSINESS CENTRE STEP TO SUCCESS FOR NEW ENTREPRENEURS

Centre offers coaching, seminars, network

BY PATRICK CASEY
Staff Writer

When Cellie Gonsalves conducts her seminars on e-commerce at the YMCA Markham Business Centre, she's not only a teacher to her students — she's also an example of how a person with a solid idea can use the resources of a professional business centre to succeed.

A recent graduate of Seneca College's Richmond Hill Business Centre, Gonsalves has tapped into a global marketplace with Cyber Flowers, an online florist operation where customers can select from more than 130 floral arrangements and arrange delivery times at www.cyberflowers.com.

The Richmond Hill resident also operates a flower store in Nobleton.

"I opened both at the same time and the online business is going gangbusters. I'm doing twice as much business online," said Gonsalves, who receives 2,500 hits a day from people as far away as Vancouver, Halifax, Taiwan and Australia. "I can't get 2,500 people into my store in one day."

"The Internet is the way of the future. It is not a fad but here to stay. It is as important to businesses as the telephone because it levels the playing field for small businesses against larger corporations. Small businesses must understand the opportunity that is staring them in the face."

Gonsalves is intrigued with the aggressive approach to online business savvy the Markham Business Centre has taken since opening its doors in July.

Facilitated by the YMCA and funded by Human Resources Development Canada to provide budding entrepreneurs with the support and skills necessary to succeed, the centre offers a self-employment assistance program and a business incubator program, with services ranging from one-on-one coaching and

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Maureen Catania
business coach and trainer

consulting, to workshops and seminars.

An extensive information network allows business owners to access important information at no cost, including a business library and reference materials, use of a fax and photocopier, a boardroom for interviews and the availability of computers with Internet access to search and register their business name.

"There was a real void in Markham when it came to business centres. There just wasn't anything out here," said centre business coach and trainer Maureen Catania, noting the 14th Avenue location has already helped 80 people in less than nine months. "Before this opened, people had to go to Richmond Hill or up to Newmarket."

"The interesting point about the YMCA and employment is people believe we cater to youths. But a large part of our participants are over 35 years old, mature adults who have found themselves looking for work, are unemployed or are choosing the self-employment route."

The centre's incubator program is a 12-week venture offering one-on-one and group coaching, as well as a variety of workshops on topics relating to entrepreneurship.

And the self-employment assistance program goes a step further where coaching is tai-

lored to the needs of a participant, who receives financial assistance throughout the program.

With the Internet creating opportunities for business owners and opening a window of possibilities, Catania said all participants need is an idea to help shape their business future.

"We don't recommend a particular business because that has to come from the individual, but 99 per cent of the people that come in already have a business idea," said Catania, who has more than nine years of retail experience to offer after selling a bagel franchise store she owned in Newmarket at the end of 1998.

"From that idea, we can develop an action plan and begin coaching them. And we have had an incredible response from people that come to our workshops on the Internet. E-commerce is now a marketing tool and it has to be incorporated into any marketing plan."

Susan Sommers has extensive background in marketing and media relations in Toronto, but after recently opening the Words Matter Communications company with a partner in Richmond Hill, she understands the frustrations of tapping into a new market.

And as a business coach at the Markham centre, she hopes to bring that message to budding business owners.

"I'm really in the same boat as many of the people I coach. I'm one of them," said Sommers. "I just wish a program like this had existed when I started my first business in 1982."

"What I have noticed is that people today really do their research and understand their market before jumping into business. They are more realistic than what we saw in the '80s and '90s. They are more prepared and I just hope to pass along some of my knowledge to make the learning curve a little shorter."

For more information about the YMCA Markham Business Centre, call 948-9622.

STARTING OUT

The YMCA Markham Business Centre offers a free 12-week business incubator program to people who want to start a business in York Region and are unemployed or working part time. A small fee applies to registrants who work full time.

ONE-ON-ONE COACHING — Weekly appointments consist of 45-minute coaching sessions with experienced business coaches and trainers, providing professional advice on starting a new business, including research, financial, marketing and business planning. Follow-up and evaluation continue up to one year.

GROUP COACHING — Register to attend a three-hour Strategies for Success workshop on topics relating to entrepreneurship. Led by experts, the workshops provide tips and information on 13 topics:

1. Advertising and Promotion
2. Cash Flow: Survival
3. Creating Dynamic Promotional Materials
4. Internet for Entrepreneurs
5. Keeping the Records Straight
6. Marketing to Win
7. Organizing your Office
8. Pricing for Profit
9. Researching Business Opportunities
10. Sales and Business Opportunities
11. Strategic Business Planning
12. Tax and Legal Considerations
13. Time and Project Management

SELF-EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM — The program is offered to individuals who want to create jobs through a self-employment program. Participants receive financial assistance throughout the program's duration.

Other assistance includes coaching, ongoing technical advice and help in business plan preparation and evaluation. Coaching is tailored to participants' needs and can include subjects such as business plan development, accounting, marketing and access to computers.

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