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Centers offer free small-business resources

Phoenix Business Journal - by [Lynn Ducey](#)

Small-business owners all over the Valley are struggling to operate with shrinking budgets, but a free resource available through **Maricopa Community Colleges** could help them keep their doors open.

Officials with the Maricopa Community Colleges Small Business Development Centers are working harder to get the message out about their operations — a resource, they say, that often is overlooked.

“We have been seeing businesses struggle for the past year or so,” said Rich Senopole, director of the Maricopa Community Colleges SBDCs. “We are really focused on working with companies and keeping them alive.”

The MCC centers -- located in Phoenix, Tempe, Mesa and Surprise -- are among 11 SBDCs across Arizona, all operated in partnership with the **U.S. Small Business Administration**. The centers’ mission is to counsel and help small businesses survive and grow.

Jack Hamlett and his wife, Kathy, own two **Mad Science** franchises in the Valley. They’ve seen firsthand how SBDCs can help.

“When we go there, it’s totally free. We get information that is valuable, and we have gotten some key insights,” Hamlett said.

The 8-year-old company offers summer camps, hands-on classroom and after-school programs, birthday parties and youth events that focus on the fun of science.

The couple became aware of their local Maricopa Community Colleges SBDC through their participation in an **Arizona Public Service Co.** small-business program several years ago. Since then, they have returned to the center repeatedly to take advantage of its offerings.

SBDCs typically are affiliated with community colleges and staffed by professionals with expertise in a range of business areas, such as accounting, human resources and marketing. Services primarily are free, but some classes and seminars are offered for small fees.

“These are for proven programs that have an educational component,” Hamlett said. “I don’t know that many people who know about the centers at all.”

That lack of awareness is problematic for many SBDC executives. To get the word out, the Maricopa Community Colleges SBDCs and the Northland Pioneer College SBDC in Show Low are participating in a nationwide nonprofit program called the Great American Small Business Challenge.

The program will begin in January, but is accepting registration from businesses nationwide.

Mike Kramer, the program's executive director, said participants will be able to use the program's free, self-guided online course to improve their business.

Northland SBDC Director Mark Engle said he decided to participate in the challenge to increase exposure and awareness about his center and the available resources. But he said small businesses in his community, which is in the White Mountains, are suffering from a downturn in tourism. To help combat that, the center is offering a Small Business 911 program to help those in distress with immediate needs.

"People don't always think about us, so it does take a little bit of word of mouth," he said.