

Success Stories

Here you will find examples of successful strategies from Phase I and Phase II states and how the identified best practices impacted those stories.

Phase I States

Arkansas Small Business: Big Rural Impact Podcast

Arkansas

The CREATE BRIDGES Arkansas team started the Arkansas Small Business: Big Rural Impact podcast to hear from rural business owners in two regions: Ozark Foothills (Izard, Sharp, and Fulton counties) and 3Cs (Little River, Howard, and Sevier counties). The podcast had three goals: 1) Highlight products and services of businesses in their respective regions; 2) Discuss ways business owners address workforce development, technology, infrastructure, and more; 3) Foster collaboration between local business owners through the sharing of ideas and best practices. Goals 1 and 2 were achieved through the development of each episode. While Goal 3 is more difficult to measure, there were instances of friends of the business owner, and professional organizations sharing and mentioning the episodes in the community. In addition, the show strived to be as accessible as possible by publishing across dozens of platform sites, offering transcripts for each episode, and the ability to listen/stream from phone, tablet, or desktop computer. As Phase I concluded, the Arkansas Small Business: Big Rural Impact boasted 29 episodes and feature more than 1,000 organic downloads.

Best practices demonstrated in success story:

- Regional Coordinators for each Arkansas region working as “boots on the ground” to develop and sustain relationships with business owners and employees and host podcast.
- Strategy implemented early in process, during the height of the COVID -19 pandemic, and kept region interested and engaged.

Online Customer Engagement and Commerce Videos

Arkansas

During the first year of the pandemic, Regional Program Coordinators developed a series of online customer engagement and commerce videos to help rural business owners connect with customers while they were forced to close their doors. Four platforms were identified (Google Business Profile, formerly Google My Business), Facebook, Tripadvisor, and Yelp) as the most relevant to the CREATE sectors while also having no cost to use them. Each platform had a video explaining how to sign-up or create a new account, manage an existing account, and how to use the mobile app on a smartphone. Each video was less than 10 minutes long and featured a PDF with instructions for business owner preference. In total, the videos were viewed more than 210 times and met a direct need of rural business owners.

Best practices demonstrated in success story:

- Regional Coordinators for each Arkansas region working as “boots on the ground” to develop and sustain relationships with business owners to truly understand their needs and create online resources that met those needs.
- Strategy implemented early in process, during the height of the COVID -19 pandemic, and kept region interested and engaged.

CREATE BRIDGES and FOCUS Inc. Provide Worker Incentives to Local Employees

Kentucky

As a part of the CREATE BRIDGES Kentucky team, FOCUS Inc. sponsored worker incentives for local employees to support locally owned businesses. FOCUS stands for Five Original Counties United for Success (includes Jackson, Clay, Lee, Owsley and Leslie counties) and is led by a Jackson Energy Cooperative employee who also served as a RSC member.

To better understand what incentives to provide to employees, employers completed a Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) program survey in 2019. This survey interviewed business owners on their employees' needs and ways to make their business more successful. Employers were then polled on which types of supplemental funding would be most helpful to their employees. Business owners reported that their employees had the greatest needs in the following areas; childcare, transportation and groceries. As an incentive for participating in the survey, employees of the local business were able to gain access to worker incentives in the form of funding for transportation, childcare or groceries.

The RSC member reached back out to business owners who participated in BRE and asked them to participate in an additional Employee Perspective Survey that collected data about their workforce. The Employee Perspective Survey was made available to these employees, and if they chose to participate they gained access to another round of funding.

The RSC member was instrumental in fostering relationships between the CREATE BRIDGES Kentucky team and regional business owners. While coordinating with employees at Jack's IGA in Beattyville, Kentucky, she learned that employees were in need of new uniforms. This was due to the store's COVID cleaning precautions causing them to get bleach on their work clothing. The RSC member reached out to the uniform provider, Cintas, and the Lexington business decided to match FOCUS Inc.'s contribution to these employees, which provided each employee four new work shirts.

The impact of the FOCUS Inc. project does not end with the individual employees. The participating local employees were given access to incentives to locally owned businesses. As mentioned previously, a goal of the project was to support local businesses, allowing the dollars spent on the incentives to remain in the community.

Best practices demonstrated in success story:

- Community champion working as “boots on the ground” to develop and sustain relationships with business owners and employees.
- This was the first strategy implemented, maximizing on the brilliance of small wins.
- This is an example of using incentives successfully, and demonstrates how the right incentives (in this case, incentives that reduced specific barriers for these employees) can be helpful in meeting the goals of this project.

Regional Youth Assist Local Business Owner with Online Marketing

Kentucky

The Regional Youth Help Desk is a program piloted in July and August 2020 as a partnership between CREATE BRIDGES, local businesses and local high school students. The program was led by the CREATE BRIDGES project coordinator and FOCUS Inc. Chairperson (RSC member). Utilizing online

resources provided by partner Southeast Kentucky Economic Development (SKED), and by partnering with a locally owned business to provide real world experience and application, youth were trained to help small business owners with online presence and social media.

The youth participating in the help desk gained valuable skills as well as real world experience working with local businesses and entrepreneurs. Student participants learned about a variety of topics related to online marketing and social media. Participants applied their knowledge throughout the program by creating weekly deliverables that demonstrated the skills learned that week, as well as assisting a local business owner with her online marketing/social media needs. By participating in all trainings, both student participants received certificates of completion in Be Boss Online, a 12-hour course on digital marketing training for small business.

When asked what they had learned from participating in the program, students reported, “Presenting in front of people. I feel like I’ve gotten better at it because I have to do it every week. I’m not as nervous anymore,” and “Definitely design skills. I didn’t ever think I would be able to make those ads or anything. I feel better about it, and more confident.”

After participating in the Regional Youth Help Desk, a local business owner noted the student she was paired with was instrumental in starting a new phase of marketing for her business. The business owner was then connected to more online resources through another CREATE BRIDGES Kentucky partner.

Best practices demonstrated in success story:

- “Boots on the ground” community champion helped lead program and recruit youth.
- This strategy was implemented early on and capitalized on the excitement of programing focused on youth and workforce development.
- This strategy highlighted regionalism, the students were not in the same county as the business owner, and students created online marketing materials for the region as a whole.

Online Support

Oklahoma

Based upon workforce and business development needs identified from the Business Retention & Expansion and Employee Perspectives Surveys, Oklahoma was able to assemble a two pronged approach to assist the CREATE sector businesses and their workforce.

Online workforce training program:

Oklahoma worked with their regional workforce board to develop an online workforce training program. This training program had two tracks, one aimed at entry level employees designed to improve job readiness, customer service skills and soft skills, and one track aimed at managers or supervisors with business development, employee development and finance tools. In addition to this program being shared broadly in the region, Oklahoma worked with a local tribe and their Division of Education to embed this training as part of the tribe’s job placement service. Job seekers utilizing the tribe’s job placement services would go through the online training as part of the placement process.

Online Business Development tools:

In addition to the online training for employees and managers, Oklahoma worked with the other

CREATE BRIDGES pilot states to host an online webinar training aimed at business owners. This training series included topics such as online marketing, finding resources for small businesses, and succession planning.

Best Practices:

- Work with local, established employment services and minority groups as partners
- Highlighted the importance of research and data for the region and how those were impactful for implementation and sustainability in the project.

Phase II States

Assisting Businesses with Increasing Their Online Presence

Illinois

It is important to identify small wins while working on long-term strategy implementation. The CREATE BRIDGES BRE survey results for IL reflected that many business owners were not tech savvy and/or didn't have a person dedicated to managing their business' online or social media presence. The BRE survey also reflected that the CREATE Sector client base was trending younger and more tech savvy. 84% of CREATE Sector businesses surveyed indicated having a Facebook presence for their business, which can be a successful online marketing strategy for customers that are already "following" the business, however, an ineffective strategy for reaching new customers, tourists and/or visitors to the region – as they are typically seeking to find shopping, dining, lodging, tourism and entertainment through a search engine on a mobile app.

The Illinois' team utilized a small portion of funding to purchase a 360 camera for the "boots on the ground" staff member to use as he assisted business owners with upgrading their Google Business Profile. During these one-on-one consultations, he learned that many business owners didn't know what Google Business Profile was, how to use it, or why it was important. During the consults, he taught them how to upload 360 shots and other photos and content to their Google Business Profile and assisted them with identifying other methods to update their online and/or social media presence.

One of the many local businesses that took advantage of the 360-photo opportunity for CREATE Sector businesses was Jennifer with the Vienna Town Square Mall. The following is a quote was posted on social media to the Johnson County Business Group: "Good morning! [Boots on the ground coordinator] took 360 photos of my store and put them on Google. If you have a moment, Google Vienna Town Square Mall and take a look! He also helped me get rid of old/bad photos and offered advice on how to improve my online presence. If you would like 360 photos for your business, contact him! This service is offered to us (at no cost) by CREATE BRIDGES Illinois Southern Five."

In addition, the boots on the ground coordinator was also able to utilize a drone owned by the University of Illinois Extension to capture drone images at select businesses, locations and events. In addition to the 360 camera, the drone was yet another piece of equipment that many of our local businesses and communities do not have access to – to support marketing and promotion efforts. His one-on-one engagement with 43 CREATE Sector businesses has resulted in 145,000 views as of March 2023.

Best practices demonstrated in success story:

- “Boots on the Ground” staff member working to develop and sustain relationships with business owners in regions.
- One of the early strategies implemented to support businesses and maximize on the brilliance of small wins.
- Highlighted the importance of research and data for the region and how those were impactful for implementation and sustainability in the project.

Regional Tourism and Pocket Maps

New Mexico

The NEEDO-NM region in New Mexico revised existing tourism maps and distributed those maps in various formats: through printing pocket maps for visitors centers and placemat maps for restaurants, as well as through installing large, framed maps in visitor centers and economic development organizations. The region also promoted tourism by distributing white water recreation handouts.

To further promote the region’s tourism opportunities, a student worker was hired to streamline online communication by linking social media platforms to the Northeast Economic Development Organization (NEEDO) website as well as to oversee the revisions and production of the regional maps. A graduate student was also hired to travel the region and create a tourism Story Map of the region which was also added to the NEEDO website. Below is an image of the digital Story Map.

The current NEEDO website can be viewed here: <https://www.needonm.org/>

Best Practices:

- This step exemplifies taking early action. The region took existing resources and updated them prior to the tourism season.
- Community champion working as “boots on the ground” to develop and sustain relationships with business owners and employees.
- This was the first strategy implemented, soon after receiving funding, and it maximized on the brilliance of small wins.
- The informal training given could have been formalized and might have led to higher success and capacity building within community.

Got Your Back Training and WeSpeakWNC

North Carolina

North Carolina led its strategy implementation with the Got Your Back Training. This day-long workshop, held in late April 2022, provided retail, hospitality, and tourism businesses with a number of tools to both recruit and retain employees in their establishments. Participants heard from industry pros about how employees can turn their jobs into careers, as well as how employers can both find employees (through the development of dynamic job postings and the nurturing of a happy and engaged staff) and hold onto their employees through the use of specific job expectations and the provision of creative and industry specific benefits. Participants were told that managers should lead by example and create more equity in the workplace, as well as engage their employees as much as possible in workplace decision-making while empowering them through skills trainings designed to promote their career growth potential. In this way, employers can say that they have their employees’ backs.

The in-person event was able to attract a dozen business owners and managers, but has also been launched as an online training on the Thinkrific platform. Currently thirteen more businesses are enrolled in the online training, and the North Carolina team is hopeful to attract at least 50 more businesses to the training. The real Got Your Back success story, however, lies in how that training has opened doors to important conversations with new partners and planning for new strategies that will impact workforce development in the region. As a result, the Film Department at Western Carolina University is assigning students the making of commercials for Got Your Back business graduates.

In addition, implementation of the WeSpeakWNC campaign has begun. Rolled out at the WeSpeakWNC Workforce Conference, it is the first conference of its kind in the region to focus on CREATE sector employers and employees. In addition to the structured networking events and the CREATE sector expo at this conference, over 100 business owners learned about regional support resources and participated in leadership and marketing trainings. Incumbent and potential employees, including over 100 high school students from the region participated in social media and conflict resolution trainings, attended the sector expo, participated in an elevator pitch event, and received culinary skills tips from the head chef at Harrah’s.

The WeSpeakWNC campaign has also broken ground as a fun way to build regionalism that includes all of the NC counties “west of Asheville”. Importantly, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians hosted the

event at the Harrah's Conference Center, a major tourism draw for the region, but not as well known to small CREATE businesses in the region.

Best practices demonstrated in success story:

- Community champions working as “boots on the ground” to develop and sustain relationships with business owners and employees.
- Got Your Back was the first strategy implemented, maximizing on the brilliance of small wins.
- Engaged employers were first to create buy-in for other strategy implementation, including WeSpeakWNC.
- As this strategy evolved into the WeSpeakWNC conference, the NC team has utilized dollars for marketing and promotion.

Secret Shopper Review and University Engagement

North Carolina

Another strategy implemented by the NC Team was the Secret Shopper review of 120 small businesses in the CREATE sector. This strategy arose from an RSC discussion of the first regional goal of supporting CREATE businesses. Participating in this discussion were educators from Western Carolina University (WCU), who saw it as a potential project for an entrepreneurship class they were offering in the fall. Working with the NC Team, these educators developed questions with their students to use in both “secret shopper” visits by the students as well as focus groups comprised of business owners.

At the end of the fall semester, students reported their findings to the NC team and regional economic development professionals who were RSC members. Among those results was data that showed that while business owners for the most part knew what the region had to offer, their employees were not as informed. This data then provided more fuel to move forward with the WeSpeakWNC campaign, which connects employees with regional assets in the CREATE sector, so that they can become regional ambassadors.

At the WeSpeakWNC workforce conference three WCU students reported these same findings to the audience of over 100 business owners and resource representatives, including Elaine Marshall, NC Secretary of State. Secretary Marshall has stated in a letter of support for new grant funding of the WeSpeakWNC campaign that “It was evident at the Conference that [WeSpeakWNC] is focused on creating and sustaining regional partnerships to work toward common goals, offering workshops and trainings for business owners and managers, as well as providing connections between employers and employees to each other as well as to existing training offered by regional support organizations.”

The educators at Western Carolina University intend to make the secret shopper review an annual class project. Students have indicated a desire to offer social media support to CREATE businesses. Best practices demonstrated in success story:

- Community champions working as “boots on the ground” to provide evidentiary support for CREATE sector business strategies.
- The Secret Shopper review was conducted by an established partner, who wants to increase their engagement with the community.
- Highlighted the importance of research and data for the region and how those were impactful for implementation and sustainability.