Both budding entrepreneurs and established business professionals share a similar need. They must make the right decisions for their business in order for it to grow and prosper. The Maryland Small Business and Technology Development Center (SBTDC) Network, with its Eastern Region headquarters located on the Salisbury University campus, is here to help them. “Businesses must focus on three key aspects for success: Money, Management and Marketing,” explained John Hickman, Eastern Region director of the SBTDC. “We provide businesses a continuum of services throughout their life cycle from start up to maturity.”

The U.S. Small Business Administration provides grants to colleges, universities and state governments in order to provide business training and advice to both existing and start-up small businesses through its Small Business Development Center (SBDC) program. The State of Maryland recently went through a special accreditation to set up a technology program within their SBDC framework, thus earning the designation of SBTDC. In order to gain this accreditation, a strategic plan and methodology were implemented. A group of consultants was made available to work with the different needs and mechanisms that technology firms require, and specialized training was made available to better assist these businesses.

The Eastern Region SBTDC covers the eight counties on the Eastern Shore from Kent County south to Worcester County. Eastern Region locations include the regional headquarters at SU, a sub-center at Chesapeake College at Wye Mills and an office in Cambridge within the City of Cambridge Office of Economic Development. A counseling office is located in Berlin, MD.

The SBTDC network serves as an entrepreneurial development entity throughout the state. “Because of this statewide network, if a specific expertise is not available in the Eastern Region, we can reach out into our network for co-counseling to assist a business,” said Hickman.

“Another important aspect of our work is confidentiality. We pride ourselves on the fact that everything we do for our clients is confidential, unless they ask us for it not to be. For example, a client might request the SBTDC to talk with a lender on their behalf. This working relationship is important because clients want to know that when they come to us to discuss a need for their business, the SBTDC is here to work with them and help them, not to serve as a reporting agency.”

Each year, hundreds of clients come to the SBTDC for one-on-one business counseling. Scores of attendees learn about better business practices through training programs. For example, the “Smart Start” prestart business course helps entrepreneurs learn the basics of what they need to do before starting a business. Many referrals are provided to businesses on where to get information, such as a business license.

Often the SBTDC will help a client who has a new idea for a business. “The approach is not to tell them whether it is a good idea or not, but to work with them through planning and guidance, thus allowing the potential entrepreneur to make an informed decision as to the success of their idea,” explained Hickman.

Assistance with business expansion is another service provided by the SBTDC. For many businesses, this is harder than the initial start up. SBTDC poses questions to the business that must be answered in order to make the decision whether the expansion is a logical extension for them. These are not simply market research questions, but internal operational questions. For example, does the business have the internal capacity to manage an expansion, and if not, where are they going to go for that? What does the expansion mean from a personnel standpoint, or from a budgetary standpoint?

SU Students Serving the Business Community

SU student projects are generally conducted with established organizations. A SBTDC consultant will serve as the lead on a student project. Students meet with business owners who have identified a need, and then the students develop guidelines as to what will be accomplished for that business owner. Students utilize their research, writing and project management skills to accomplish this.

An excellent example of a successful student project was a case of a small family business that had grown way beyond the casual working relationship of related family members. As a result, the business needed a policy and procedure manual. SU students interviewed the owner in order to identify the needs, researched the best practices in that industry, drafted an outline for the manual, and got input on the policies and procedures that would work best for the company. “When the project concluded, the owner had an excellent policy and procedure manual that was put into use,” noted Hickman.

These student projects are conducted on an undergraduate level as part of the SU Small Business Consulting coursework. “Student projects range from documenting processes and procedures to market assessment of products, services and marketing avenues,” continued Hickman. “Students also are taught the importance of client confidentiality as they go into the business world, preparing them for a professional service firm.”
SU’s Role in Entrepreneurship

SU encourages entrepreneurship whenever possible. For example, the Franklin P. Perdue School of Business event, the Bernstein Business Plan Competition, was recently expanded into a three-phase entrepreneurship competition. The SBTDC helped coordinate and design a poster competition called “Invest In My Idea,” which was part of the event. They provided training to students in preparing their plan, making sure their idea was communicated well. A panel of judges then chose the businesses in which they would most likely invest. The top 15 finalists from the poster competition went on to compete for the grand prize of $10,000.

The Eastern Region SBTDC connects the business community to the SU academic community, making sure there is access to the valuable resources available. Often businesses do not know how to uncover the expertise obtainable from educational institutions. The SBTDC helps pave the way to a working relationship. Internships and employment opportunities often materialize from this collaborative effort. The SBTDC works closely with the Applied Business Learning Experience (ABLE) program through the Perdue School of Business along with the Career Services office, connecting students, graduates and businesses.

The Pursuit of Excellence

The SBTDC can help your business excel by giving you the opportunity to work with an experienced business consultant on a no-fee, confidential basis; by connecting you to the correct service provider for your business; by working closely with the economic development office in your region to make sure you are connected on a local level so that your project is successful; and by providing valuable information on various funding mechanisms and sources so crucial to success.

Success Stories:
How SU Student Teams Work with Local Businesses

It gives me great pleasure to write this letter of thanks to the Small Business Development [and Technology] Center and the Perdue School of Business for your entire help and great job with scrutinizing MTS Broadcasting and coming up with a great plan that will be a part of this company for years to come.

The Small Business Development [and Technology] Center/Perdue School of Business met with me and my staff to get an idea of what we were looking for as a small business. After that meeting, a partnership was formed and the Perdue School of Business went to work. Investigating the competition and taking our ideals to a new level, they gave us the pros and cons of our business and made significant changes while giving us reasons why the changes were needed, how to implement the changes and showing possible income sources of the changes.

Thanks for all your help and I look forward to working with the Small Business [and Technology] Development Center/the Perdue School of Business again in the future.

Sincerely,
Troy D. Hill
General Manager
MTS Broadcasting (WAAI-FM, WTDK-FM, WCEM-AM/FM), Cambridge, MD

John Hickman, Eastern Region director of the SBTDC, suggested a student project: research the end market for sorghum bagasse. The goal was to develop a cost structure to convert sorghum into a dried stalk that can be stored, and a pelletized material that can be bagged and then sold. The student group, with Lois Haggerty from SBTDC as their mentor, presented their findings to Solar Fruits Biofuels. They included sweet sorghum opportunities, fuel potential, financial information, supporting data, and recommendations to Solar Fruits Biofuels. Jeff Benner and Todd Stephens of Solar Fruits Biofuels were extremely satisfied with the results: “It was an exceptional project. It was on par with several professional consulting reports that I have had prepared for me,” said Benner. “It was a great help for us in redirecting our business plan just before we make our final adjustments prior to launching our company.”

The team set up a Thank God It’s Gluten Free (TGIGF) Facebook page, Twitter and Pinterest accounts for Elizabeth Davis, owner of TGIGF, linked them to her Web site and taught her how to use them effectively. The team also researched gluten-free product tradeshows to attend, generated a list of local restaurants that serve gluten-free menu items, provided merchandising ideas and options, and supplied options for publishing an e-book of recipes. Davis bought an iPhone at their direction and now is blogging, Tweeting and posting photos to Facebook. Elizabeth is ecstatic about the help she received. “The SBTDC has helped me every step of the way from licensing to marketing,” she said. “I have gained so much knowledge concerning business development and am truly grateful for the services they provided.”