

Uplifting Other Local Businesses to Help Your Own Business Reach New Heights

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Connecting with other small business owners in your community can extend beyond just networking and referrals. Forming meaningful relationships with other entrepreneurs can also lead to securing valuable local vendors that can help enhance your business. This very strategy became a crucial part of Cincinnati-based Cream + Sugar Coffee House's business structure.

As co-owner of the business and a Black woman, Taren Kilebrew is very thoughtful when it comes to choosing her business partners, making sure their practices and values align with hers, along with the coffee house's vision of spreading love and inclusion.

"Anything we can get specifically from a small business owner, we will do that. We really do seek out women in particular. All of our artwork in the shop is by one artist, and it's a woman. And we know her. We've sold a lot of her art, so we're very intentional in that way," Taren said.

"Even some of our tea is by a woman-owned business. It's called our Healing Tea. People love [it]. We were thinking about health—because we're older, we're in our fifties—and we wanted to make sure as we are progressing in life, that everybody else is progressing in life."

Care and concern for the community is a central tenet for

Cream + Sugar, which shows in the many ways they support the people of Cincinnati, including the quality of the food.

"We wanted to make sure with our food, because we do love food, that people felt good about eating what they were eating. We care about women's health particularly—diabetes, high blood pressure. And specifically for the Black community, we wanted to just let people know, 'Hey, you don't have to have meat with every single meal.'"

While gently educating her neighborhood about healthy food options, Taren also prepares the next generation for business success with an active internship program at the coffee house to help young people find their entrepreneurial spirit. In fact, the location of the shop was chosen in part because Taren's business partner used to live in the neighborhood and still had family there.

Familiarity, in this case, sets the tone for the store. In order to keep that spirit alive, Taren makes sure to create a welcoming atmosphere, which starts with her employees, some of whom are students at nearby Xavier University.

"It is all about camaraderie and making sure that people can pretty much be the essence of who we are," she said. "We haven't had a lot of turnover. And we realize this is nobody's career. So most of the time, we can keep people on for a year, which is pretty good. And then if we keep them longer, that is always great."

The atmosphere is what attracted Bailey Dixon, Yelp's Cincinnati Community Manager, to Cream + Sugar for the first time. "The coffee was fabulous, but any place can serve good coffee," Bailey said. "Not just any place can make you feel like you're welcome, like anybody is invited and can experience this and can be there and enjoy something. So that was my first time coming in. Since then, I like to stop in and work because the wifi is fast and the food is delicious."

With a 5-star rating currently, Cream + Sugar is a hit with reviewers. As a small business owner, Taren understands the importance of reviews but tries to keep the positive and critical feedback in perspective.

“I think reviews are important. They can make or break a business. I have experienced a bad review, but I knew where that was coming from. And at the end of the day, if I see one or two stars, the number is very minimum,” Taren said, pointing out that even if she receives a 1- or 2-star review, there are dozens more that sing her business’s praises.

Taking criticism in online reviews with a grain of salt is a healthy strategy, according to Bailey. “I work with business owners every day. I have heard the stories of, ‘Oh, I got a 1-star review,” she said. “And I tell [them], look at all these positive reviews. Look at all these amazing examples of what you’re doing and the people that you touched with your products and your services and your food and your story.”

As many entrepreneurs know, starting a business comes with its ups and downs, but taking each challenge in stride may just reveal new opportunities for growth.

More lessons Taren shared that might be useful to your small business include:

- **Keep your hiring practices in perspective.** When hiring, it helps to remember this might not necessarily be a career for your employees. Hire and train accordingly and be prepared for turnover.
- **Share positive reviews with employees.** Raising morale can be as simple as letting staff know their work is being recognized. Make sure employees know they are valued by sharing positive reviews and other customer feedback with them.
- **It’s perfectly acceptable to keep things simple.** A streamlined menu allows Taren to focus on quality

ingredients and be cost-efficient.

- **Share what you learn with others.** As a Black woman, Taren wants to lift up other Black female entrepreneurs and pass on things she's learned over the years. Mentoring others and being a positive influence can create a lasting legacy.

Listen to the episode below to hear directly from Taren and Bailey, and subscribe to *Behind the Review* for more from new business owners and reviewers every Thursday.

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