

Small businesses say they have an image problem

By Brock Weir

As a small business owner, George Hughes says he's heard the same old thing time and again from people in the job market: you don't get ahead or get a great job if you work for a small business.

Nothing could be further from the truth, according to the owner of Lifestyle Oasis, and Mr. Hughes is one of many local business owners looking for advocacy from the Ontario Chamber of Commerce to help stamp out this false perception.

"Small businesses have a perception problem," he says. "The perception is that you get a great job if you work for a big business like a hospital or a manufacturer, that it is a better job than a small business. The reality is completely the opposite: you learn more, you're more respected, treated well, and treated like one of the family."

These were concerns voiced by Mr. Hughes and a number of small business owners at a roundtable hosted by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, and its Provincial Counterpart, at the Aurora Chamber's office last week.

Their campaign, "Small Business Too Big To Ignore" is designed to highlight the contributions small businesses make to their respective communities and look at top barriers in the way of small business growth. According to Sandra Watson of the Aurora Chamber, these barriers include attracting and retaining good talent, costs and challenges being faced by the businesses, as well as infrastructure gaps.

"The main concern that was echoed around the room was that small business doesn't get a good rap. Colleges and university students, new workers that might be entering the work force, tend to look at big businesses to find work because they look at job security, for all the benefits that go along with it, the pension plans," says Ms. Watson. "The perception is you can't get that with small businesses."

"A number expressed rising cost of hydro, HST doesn't seem to have a really level playing field. There is the cost of WSIB. A number of participants agreed that those costs affected their business and their bottom line. A lot of people also felt [public transit] was cost prohibitive for people making minimum wage, wasn't very accessible, that schedules weren't great, and that needed to be looked at."

Nurse Vicky McGrath, who runs the Aurora-based small business Nurse Next Door, which provides home care, says she agrees with many of the points raised at the meeting, many of which she concurred with during the session. Echoing Mr. Hughes' idea of a perception problem, Ms. McGrath says businesses like hers find it hard to compete with larger health care partners such as hospitals or others that receive provincial funding.

"As small businesses, it is harder to attract and retain staff when the perception is working for small business is not as lucrative, the salaries aren't the same, or the benefits aren't available, or long-term growth and opportunity isn't there either," says Ms. McGrath. "The school doesn't promote home care as the ultimate goal for caregivers or individuals interested in the care industry, perhaps. We would like to see small business and home care promoted as a solution for the rising cost of health care in our province. I guess working with the school a little bit with that would be helpful as well."

Business people like Ms. McGrath join chambers like Aurora's to have broader connections with the small business community and find strength in numbers. That being said, she adds it is important for individuals to bring their concerns to a wider audience, including the Province, and other stakeholders in their particular industries.

Outside of the image problem, technical supports should also be advocated for, she adds, including greater access to broadband, which would improve communication with clients, caregivers and staff, taking HST off home care in the same way as other nursing bodies are exempt, and improving public transportation which would make getting to clients more cost-effective.

For Mr. Hughes, however, a focus on public transportation is a double-edged sword. While it might make it easier for employees to get to their job, it does not necessarily help the bottom line of a small business like his.

“Never in infrastructure do they ever address the transportation of goods,” he says. “[We] don’t ship any goods via public transportation; we ship our goods by trucks or trains, planes, and everything like that and how are trucks getting down the road?”

The findings of this roundtable will be compiled by the Aurora Chamber of Commerce, the results of which will be presented in a further report by the Ontario Chamber to coincide with Small Business Week this October.