



## PROJECT INSIGHTS REPORT

# Resilience digital marketing prototype

SME Adaptability, Tech and Automation, Inclusive Economy.

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Business owners from equity-deserving groups were among the hardest hit during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of them were forced to pivot their businesses online and needed to quickly develop or sharpen their digital marketing capabilities.

The Building Small Business Resilience Digital Marketing Training Prototype was specifically designed by Sheridan College to help address small business owners' skill gaps in digital marketing, build resilience, and prepare them to face any future economic shock or disruption.

The developed program leveraged existing curricula and consultation with small business owners and was tested with 45 learners over two cohorts. The program was successful in helping participants develop digital marketing skills, and both cohorts saw increases in revenue, customer engagement, and number of staff post-program.

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### PARTNERS

Sheridan College

### LOCATIONS

Ontario

### INVESTMENT

\$138,780

**Evaluation Report:**  
Evaluation of  
resilience digital  
marketing  
prototype

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Digital marketing is an essential part of small business success. Entrepreneurs and small business owners need to ensure they are equipped with digital and data capabilities to build and grow their customer connections and relationships online. As a large part of Canada's economy and drivers of its productivity, SMEs must be encouraged to invest in the skills required to adopt technological changes, such as digital marketing. Programs that integrate a deep understanding of the challenges and needs of small business owners are necessary to overcome the barriers they face to training and skills development.

#### KEY INSIGHT #1

Twelve months after completing the program, both cohorts had increased their yearly revenue by 242% and 121%, respectively.

#### KEY INSIGHT #2

Participants across both cohorts experienced increased confidence in their digital marketing skills, especially related digital strategy and social media marketing.

#### KEY INSIGHT #3

All learners who responded to the post-program survey agreed that the development of a real marketing strategy was the most important and impactful part of the training.

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## The Issue

Small business owners in Ontario faced financial hardships and grave economic setbacks due to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially those owned by women, immigrants, and racialized peoples. Virtually all small business owners needed to quickly pivot to online offerings to navigate the prolonged and unpredictable lockdown restrictions. For many owners from equity-deserving groups, digital marketing was new, and they needed to quickly develop a digital marketing presence online or risk going out of business.

## What We're Investigating

This project sought to address this skills gap by developing the Building Small Business Resilience Digital Marketing Prototype at Sheridan College. The project's aim was to support business owners from under-represented groups including Indigenous peoples, LGBTQ2S+ persons, persons with disabilities, racialized peoples, and/or women to rapidly build digital marketing skills that would support the success of their business in a digital world, and ultimately make them more resilient to future shocks.

Using existing successful digital marketing courses at Sheridan, an intensive 12-week curriculum was developed. The program consisted of five hours of learning per week, including a two-hour group workshop and three-hour mentor session. The overall goal of the program was to guide learners through developing and running a digital marketing campaign. Each participant received \$500 to spend on their online promotional activities. The modest budget did not aim for participants to achieve their campaign's end goals but to learn how to plan and spend their budget across various digital channels effectively. Participants in the program were business owners from an equity-deserving community, who had secured clientele and revenues (not a startup), and who had some followers and engagements on their digital marketing channels.

In the short-term, participants were expected to develop and execute a digital marketing campaign plan for their businesses and customer base; evaluate its implementation and impact; and make necessary changes to optimize the results. In the long-term, participants were expected to increase their capacity to successfully promote their businesses online, earn revenue, and build resilience against future economic disruptions in a rapidly changing economy.

The process of developing the 12-week program included consultation with small business owners to better understand the main problems or failures with their online marketing activities, the skills most needed in their businesses, and the types of training programs that would give them the best chance to succeed. The consultation included online surveys with 153 participants, online discussion boards, and focus groups with 26 business owners.

## What We're Learning

Forty-five small business owners participated in two cohorts of the program. The first group included 21 and the second group included 28 participants, four of whom were also participants in the first cohort. More than three-quarters, (35) of the small business owners completed the program, with the second cohort having a higher graduation rate at 75% (21 out of 28) than the first cohort at 67% (14 out of 21).

Twelve months after completing the program, both cohorts:

- Increased their yearly revenue, the first by 242% and the second by 121%.
- Increased the number of employees to cope with customer expansion from Ontario to national and international customer bases.
- Increased customer engagement across all channels.

- Increased confidence in their digital marketing skills, especially related digital strategy and social media marketing.

At the end of the program, the first cohort rated their satisfaction with the program 4.7 out of 5, the second cohort 4.6. 100% of both cohorts would recommend the program to other small businesses.

The project was successful in helping equity-deserving small business owners strengthen their digital marketing capabilities, address skill gaps, build resilience and prepare them to face the future. The program was successful in helping the participating business owners learn the skills needed to do business online and to compete as a business digitally.

### **Practical planning skills that keep on giving**

In post-program follow ups, all participants who responded to the survey agreed that the development of a real marketing strategy was the most important and impactful part of the training. While some participants found it challenging to come up with the right strategies for their businesses including the content approach, communication channels, marketing messages, as well as which marketing technology and tools to use, most of those surveyed acknowledged the strategy planning as essential to their campaign effectiveness and overall success, and some noted they referred back to their strategic plan over time to conduct more research, and update the plan as their business situations changed. In addition to applying the skills directly themselves, some participants turned to outsourcing marketing functions and using knowledge they'd acquired to help them hire suitable digital marketing service providers, prepare thorough marketing briefs with clear objectives, and evaluate their performance.

### **Building connections between learners**

The project was delivered online due to the COVID-19 restrictions. While remote learning offers ease and flexibility, participants reported they missed the social interactions, which were difficult to achieve in an online group setting. With the limitation of online interactions, the program could not fully maximize opportunities for business networking and group learning. While many participants formed close bonds with others in their industry that continued after completing the program, these interactions and bonds would have been easier to develop and stronger should they have had opportunities to connect in person. Group learning also helps participants think more critically with a deeper understanding of the content, where participants can learn from one another by pooling their knowledge and skills to solve more complex problems than individuals alone can do. Participants reported they gained a great deal of insight and knowledge from interacting with their peers. Going forward, the program could combine both in-person and online learning so participants can experience the benefits of both traditional classroom learning and remote learning.

### **Understand the learners**


In-depth consultation with the target population allowed program developers to design a curriculum that met the needs of small business owners. In addition to feedback on delivery preferences like mode, length, frequency, and timing, feedback on challenges, failures, and the skills needed were mapped to the program curriculum topics and learning activities to identify gaps. Despite the consideration of end-user feedback into the program design, the program did not meet the needs of all participants. Some participants found they did not have time to digest and reflect on their learning in between sessions and began to feel overwhelmed and could not keep up with the content as much as they wanted to. Some of these participants from the first cohort repeated the program with the second cohort for the opportunity to revisit the content. Going forward, the program could stretch the delivery timeframe from 12 weeks to 28 weeks, with one class per week and more breaks between learning topics allowing participants ample time to reflect on their learning by themselves and with their group.



### **Why It Matters**

Four years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, digitization continues to accelerate, and consumers continue to embrace online shopping. Digital marketing has become an essential part of small business success, so entrepreneurs need to ensure they are equipped with digital and data capabilities to build and grow their customer connection and relationship online.

Canada's economy is made up largely of small and medium enterprises with significant constraints on their ability to invest in skills and training. Efforts to increase the capacity of small and medium-sized business owners to adopt technological changes, including digital marketing, drives Canada's overall productivity. This project serves as a useful model for other post-secondary institutions to develop their own digital marketing resources for entrepreneurs and SME owners, and for how to adapt existing courses to respond to changes in the operating environment.



Beyond its specific lessons for digital marketing and SMEs, this project demonstrates the value of training and skills curriculum and interventions consulting with end-users to ensure their needs are well understood and prioritized. Many projects funded by the Future Skills Centre that have been successful and able to demonstrate impact, have invested the time and money in meaningful consultation and building their understanding of the population they are hoping to impact. Projects that have stumbled and failed to meet objectives sometimes discover through implementation that they misunderstood the needs of the target population or not accounted for their needs in the project design. Funders of skills and training interventions should encourage grantees to explicitly build in needs assessment to project plans, especially when the target population includes under-represented groups like Indigenous people, women, racialized peoples, and those living with disabilities, whose needs have historically not been adequately accounted for.

## What's Next

Insights and learning from the two cohorts that participated in the prototype testing will be applied to the development of other digital marketing programs in the [Pilon School of Business, Faculty of Continuing and Professional Studies and EDGE Entrepreneur hub](#) at Sheridan College.

The Future Skills Centre acknowledges that the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee share a special relationship to the 'Dish With One Spoon Territory,' where our office is located, bound to share and protect the land. As a pan-Canadian initiative, FSC operates on the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations across Turtle Island, the name given to the North American continent by some Indigenous peoples. We are grateful for the opportunity to work in this territory and commit ourselves to learning about our shared history and doing our part towards reconciliation.