

Emerging 200 program identifies small businesses with greatest potential

By Tannette Johnson-Elie
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It's rare to hear of companies growing in these tough times. Most news reports paint a dismal outlook for business, big and small.

So it's encouraging to see a group of small-business owners in Milwaukee who are positioned for growth, with the help of the U.S. Small Business Administration's Emerging 200 initiative.

Emerging 200 - or e200 - helps small inner-city businesses that have substantial potential for growth connect with high-level training, networking and other resources that can help them succeed. The program was launched in 2007 in Milwaukee and nine other cities. This spring it will be expanded to 15 more.

The objective is to create a network of companies that can create jobs, particularly in distressed inner-city neighborhoods. It's a smart move for an agency that has drawn criticism in the past for not doing enough to help inner-city businesses.

"Programs like e200 are important because they help people create capacity," says Eric Ness, SBA district director for Wisconsin. "That's something we must do if we're going to be competitive in a global economy."

In recent weeks, 200 CEOs and executives of businesses from participating cities have graduated from the Emerging 200 program armed with a three-year plan for growth.

Here in Milwaukee, 15 small-business owners completed the program this month and have become their own support network, drawing on each other's experiences and expertise to help move their businesses forward.

"This is not something you learn in a textbook, but in a setting where you have other individuals with like experience," says Jovita Carranza, SBA deputy administrator.



Ramirez, owner of Ramirez Restoration, inspects a chimney this week in Wauwatosa. He said the small-business contacts and strategic planning skills he has gained through the e200 program will help him expand his business.

Program participants attend weekly sessions that cover a variety of business-related topics, including finance, sales and marketing, human resources, leadership and strategy. It's like a mini-MBA program.

The beauty is that this knowledge is free to entrepreneurs who meet the qualifications of having been in business for three years and whose companies have annual sales of \$400,000 or more, with a few exceptions on the revenue rule.

The best part of e200 is the networking. Nascent entrepreneurs such as Karl Ramirez have cultivated relationships with other small-business owners he might not have met otherwise.

When you're in the trenches trying to survive the difficult, early phases of business, you often don't take the time to get out and network with others who share your experiences. That was the case for Ramirez.



Karl Ramirez (left), owner of Ramirez Restoration, and employee Nathan Dunkelberger clean soot from a Wauwatosa chimney this week. Ramirez said of the Emerging 200 program: "It helped me to set some goals up through 2012 and helped me to see the potential for growth."

Ramirez, 34, is president and owner of Ramirez Restoration, on Milwaukee's east side, a small masonry and restoration company he started three years ago with minimal capital and resources. The company, which has annual sales just over \$100,000, specializes in masonry, restoration of historic residential and commercial buildings, chimney maintenance and roofing.

Like many small-business owners, Ramirez was so caught up in the daily operation of his business he didn't develop a strategic plan. With help from e200, he has taken a longer term view. One of his goals is to break into government contracting to help generate more sales. Through e200, he gained insight and knowledge about how the process works and how to cut through red tape.

"It helped me to set some goals up through 2012 and helped me to see the potential for growth," he said.

Ramirez, who has 10 years of experience in masonry and roofing, said networking with other entrepreneurs helped him to see how to run his company more efficiently.

"We learned how to be CEOs of a company, how to make our businesses grow, how to manage our numbers," said Ramirez, an international studies graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. "It helped me greatly because I was missing a lot of those pieces. The more I educate myself, the better I will be, the better my business will be."

By sharing best practices, small-business owners can improve everything from sales to operations, and the Emerging 200 gives them a venue where they can learn from each other.

Now, thanks to Emerging 200, Ramirez believes his company is in a good position to grow and to weather the challenges of a tough economy.

"I don't see how anyone can not learn from this program," said Ramirez. "You learn that things happen to all of us. You have to work hard to get where you want to go."