

BACK TO BUSINESS IOWA PODCAST

A partnership of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and America's SBDC Iowa

SEASON 1 | EPISODE 24: Iowa Source Link

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Description: *Steve Adams interviews Patrick Luensmann, senior program manager at the University of Northern Iowa. He manages Iowa Source Link, a collaboration between the University of Northern Iowa and the Iowa Economic Development Authority. If you are a business looking for technical assistance or resources, this is the portal you want to visit.*

Transcript:

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Steve Adams, host 00:10

Hello, and welcome to the Back to Business Iowa podcast from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. This podcast is a collaboration between Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and the programs including Community and Economic Development, Farm, Food and Enterprise Development, and the Iowa Small Business Development Centers. These podcasts cover relevant topics for businesses and individuals related to education, research and technical assistance during and post COVID-19.

Steve Adams, host 00:54

Hi, everybody, Steve Adams here, field specialist three at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, part of the Community and Economic Development unit and your host for this series of podcasts. In this podcast, we'll be speaking with Patrick Luensmann, senior program manager at Iowa Source Link. Patrick, welcome, and thank you for being with us today.

Patrick Luensmann 01:15

Absolutely happy to be here, Steve.

Steve Adams, host 01:18

Patrick, can you tell us a little bit about Iowa Source Link?

Patrick Luensmann 01:22

For sure. So Iowa Source Link, first and foremost, the quick history. We've been around since 2012 and our program is a collaboration between the Iowa Economic Development Authority out of Des Moines and the University of Northern Iowa up in Cedar Falls. We work with, so the Source Link platform is actually a national platform that we brought to Iowa, those eight long years ago. And our main focus is really trying to connect Iowa businesses with all of the resources that exist to help people start, grow, expand, and even exit their business all across Iowa. So we are that partnership program, so we try to cover the state from coast to coast, from the Missouri to Mississippi, and do most of our work virtually online at IASourceLink.com or you can just search Iowa Source Link, and you'll find us.

Steve Adams, host 02:25

Excellent. So what's your role as senior program manager? What does that all entail for you, Patrick?



Patrick Luensmann 02:31

Yeah. So on Source Link we work with all of—our partners are the public sector service providers like yourself, Steve, throughout the state. So we have over, currently we have over 365 partners that are a part of our directory and offer services to small businesses. So my role, along with Amy Kuhlers from the Economic Development Authority, we work with those partners to make sure that we've got up to date information, contact information that, you know, people can always find and search.

Patrick Luensmann 03:09

So what maybe the question is, is so why do people come to Source Link, right? So we are really looking to be that, so you get that first question, right? You don't know. You don't know who to talk to. You go out to Google, and you select starting a business in Iowa, right? That's probably the most Googled term for someone who's just, you know, I've got this great idea, what do I do?

Patrick Luensmann 03:37

And what we want to be able to do is get them that information quickly. So another part of my role as the senior program manager here is to make sure that it's a smooth, smooth process. So when you land on one of the Source Link pages, we want to as efficiently and as quickly as possible connect you to the right resource. Whether it be just learning bit of information for you to learn for yourself, advance, you know, your understanding of the situation, and then connect to the right person throughout the state where you can really dig into your specific issues and move forward with your business. We really just want people to be empowered to find that information and really start taking those steps forward.

Steve Adams, host 04:26

So how would you say that Iowa Source Link then differed from resources that might be available to small businesses, for example, through the Iowa Small Business Development Centers?

Patrick Luensmann 04:36

Yeah, great question. So the Small Business Development Center is probably our biggest partner. So as people come to Source Link and are looking through the content, when they reach out to us and say, hey, look, like I want to start, you know, a dog groomer out in Sheldon, Iowa, I need somebody to talk to Source Link does not do consulting or coaching. We provide that like base information, and then we connect to them into that Small Business Development Center. So we are one of their biggest referrers where we just want to quickly move people in the right direction.

Patrick Luensmann 05:15

If you're familiar with the Small Business Development Center, awesome resource, but when someone who's never run their own business or started their business before, they don't necessarily think to go out and search for the Small Business Development Center. We try to catch all those people with like a bigger net, through marketing, through our Google keywords and organic searches, and then help funnel them to the right resources that can really get them, you know, really pulling in the right direction.

Patrick Luensmann 05:44

It can be really frustrating, especially when you get into the depths of the internet, on what am I supposed to do, who am I supposed to talk to? There's lots of guides and content and you could watch YouTube for probably 12 hours, and you still might not have the right answer. So we want to be able to quickly move them into that right resource, get them in touch with a person that can really take them either, well now with COVID, you know, online, through Zoom, or email, phone, or even in person, and really help their fears go away and get them started.

Steve Adams, host 06:27

Well, terrific. I like that partnership agreement you've got going on with the SBDC. And yes, the SBDC does offer that personal touch, obviously. Just to back up a little bit, you talked about your partnership with the University of Northern Iowa, is that through their Institute for Decision Making by chance, Patrick?

Patrick Luensmann 06:46

So I'm part of the Center for Business Growth and Innovation, which is a sister program for the Institute for Decision Making. So I'm a University of Northern Iowa employee, and so we at the Center for Business Growth and Innovation offer, first and foremost, our expertise in online content delivery and web management to the Source Link platform. And then beyond that, the rest of our center offers, you know, we've got our own regional SBDC that sits at UNI, so that is part of my center. And then we do direct consulting with any business on, you know, you're working with blood and money, it can get a little interesting. So how do you navigate those family relationships?

Patrick Luensmann 07:32

We've taken a recent focus for innovation, so we house the Intellectual Property Office at UNI in my center, and we also work with people that are looking to exit by doing business valuations, succession planning, and some transition planning. So we are part of the Business and Community Services Division at UNI, which is where the Institute for Decision Making is, as well as my center, the Center for Business Growth and Innovation. Strategic Marketing Services is there up in UNI, with primary market research. And then we've got the Iowa Waste Reduction Center that works with businesses on environmental impacts. We've got a nice little corner of campus, our own little building where we provide a lot of services to the community.

Steve Adams, host 08:21

Well, it sounds like a terrific resource. Well, you mentioned COVID-19. And obviously, it's on everybody's mind these days. How have you been assisting your clients in navigating what I would call a very challenging time?

Patrick Luensmann 08:36

Yeah, absolutely. It's been a wild ride for the last three months, to say the least. And on Source Link, we wanted to quickly get up as much information as possible, but staying true to our mission of just providing up to date information on all the different announcements, proclamations, federal bills, state relief programs. So we we carved out a space of our website dedicated to the Coronavirus response as it pertains to people's businesses, so really trying to help people walk through the Small Business Relief Program.

Patrick Luensmann 09:17

They did the Targeted Small Business Grant program, the EIDL loans, Economic Disaster Injury Loans from the SBA, everyone's favorite acronym, PPP, from the federal government through the CARES Act. Tried to as concisely as possible put together links and resources to get everyone the information that they needed. And then with those through my center we hosted for March and April, and a little bit into May, hosted twice a day webinars really trying to tackle some of the most pressing issues with experts, so you could hop online with a quick 30 minute live sessions where, whether it be someone from a business insurance office, attorneys, whether they're administering some of these federal programs or I guess state programs. We tried to provide access to be able to ask them some direct questions and make the most of that time moving forward and being clear.

Patrick Luensmann 10:28

There was so much happening, especially in April, with, you know, well, this week, they say this and next week, they'll say something different, and it changed already four times since they released it. We were just trying to help show everybody the steps that it went through. Well, you know, if we get a question, Well, last week, they said I could apply this way, we just wanted to make sure we had all the information that they would be able to, you know, find the most recent and accurate piece together. And as we've moved further into the summer, as most people have, really started to take a look at recovery. And as we, you know, reopen and get things back to some sort of new normal, included a lot of guidelines.

Patrick Luensmann 11:13

So working with the Economic Development Authority and the governor's office, they produced, I guess their version with the Iowa Department of Public Health, of the small business reopening guidelines, branded it with both IEDA and Iowa Source Link. So we've got those hosted up there on our website as well, which is really a catch-all. You know, some of those basics for as you're looking to reopen your small business, a lot of guidelines, or things to just keep in mind, as you're really trying to, you know, ramp back up in your operations.

Steve Adams, host 11:50

Well, you brought up a phrase, the new normal, we've been hearing that a lot. But here's another phrase we we keep hearing, and that's how businesses have had to really pivot their way of doing business. So, can you tell us about some of your clients and how they may have pivoted during this pandemic?

Patrick Luensmann 12:08

Yeah, I mean, I think what's what's fascinating with working with Source Link is that we see lots of people every day, but just for a little bit of time. And I think the most fascinating thing about their pivots was first, being able to quickly adapt to online sales, whether it was through Facebook, or whether it was through trying to put up an e-commerce website. That if they hadn't necessarily paid as much attention to it before March, they really quickly got that going. And were able to, you know, with some of the resources and partners, make it so they could sustain themselves through the pandemic by moving as many of their things online as possible. Or if their business or service didn't allow for that, to be able to make modifications to their product offering to allow them to continue to operate during the pandemic.

Patrick Luensmann 13:08

The other fascinating piece, and I think this is awesome and speaks really highly of lowans and I'm sure people everywhere, but at least from my experience, is that we never really saw a slowdown in people wanting to start new businesses or identifying opportunities, and then being willing to go after them, even in the middle of great uncertainty. I think that is something that really sort of inspired us to continue to try to operate the highest level, because we've got people literally every day asking like, well, I've got this idea for a new business, how do I start it?

Patrick Luensmann 13:47

Or I want to, you know, produce face masks or gloves and gowns or, you know, trying to fit and fill other gaps in the market. And whether that was out of opportunity or necessity, I can't really say, but I think it was really encouraging that, you know, small business-minded people were still pushing forward even with, you know, not knowing what was gonna happen in the next three months.

Steve Adams, host 14:21

We've noticed some of those same things as well. I know, members of our small business assistance team are helping distilleries, for example, develop hand sanitizer, which was, you know, that's

definitely a pivot, but it was a necessary pivot for them. So would you say that you've seen some things that work really well, and maybe have also identified where clients might be falling a little short, perhaps?

Patrick Luensmann 14:47

Yeah, I mean, I think the things that have worked really well are understanding how to connect with people where they're at, and maybe taking a step back from your normal business operations of, well they just came into the store. So we've seen live interactive, both like audio and video. So maybe before your retail store didn't sell online. The number of them that went to like a Facebook Live almost, you know, QVC type of presentation of doing a Facebook Live with products, showing them off and like selling them right there in the Facebook chat was a really awesome pivot for people who probably would have never considered doing a Facebook livestream before the pandemic.

Patrick Luensmann 15:39

That was something that was so far out of their minds, because people could just come in and shop. So being able to take your product or service and really deliver to the people where they're at, I think was the most beneficial pivot. And I think the people that maybe fell down on it were the ones that didn't probably have the knowledge or the confidence in the technology to be able to make those changes quickly enough before, you know, they lost too much of their operation, it's a tough tight tightrope to walk when, if you're not comfortable or hadn't been comfortable with operating on, you know, whether it be a website, social media, you know, blog.

Patrick Luensmann 16:29

If those things weren't necessarily happening beforehand, it was incredibly difficult for some people to get all that up and going, to be able to maintain that operation, which which is unfortunate for them. So I think that it's where they were definitely falling short was not...part of it is just not having the vision beforehand of you know, in 2020 that some sort of web presence can be very beneficial. I wouldn't go as far as to say it's a requirement. But with the information age that we're in, everyone goes to their favorite search engine first to look up your business, check reviews, find your hours, phone number, email, pictures of your products. And if some of that stuff was lacking, it became really difficult to to capture that business for those companies.

Steve Adams, host 17:34

Well as we like to provide advice to clients too, we try to tell them that not everybody is going to be a lawyer, an accountant, webmaster and whatnot. But they probably if they did not feel comfortable with that technology, probably ought to find someone. I'm sure they've got a grandson or nephew or some other person in their family that could probably have helped them. And of course there are professional services out there as well. So I think they would have to look towards that too. I was just thinking, I've got the Iowa Source Link page up right in front of me right now. Is there anything on that page that you feel like is underutilized and what would that be? And what would you think that small business might want to take a closer look at?

Patrick Luensmann 18:20

Yeah, great question and I've got three quick ones. So first, maybe set the stage. Part of what we want to do with Source Link is partner with as many state and local county resources as possible. And with us working with the Iowa Economic Development Authority, it gives us a unique chance to partner with state government agencies. So first, I think, every year we run a webinar series with the Iowa Department of Revenue, where we take in-depth looks at taxes. Which is not fun and is not really exciting, but it is a necessary part of running and operating your business.

Patrick Luensmann 19:03

So earlier this month, we did the basics of sales and use tax. So if you were looking to start up a retail business or you've been running one for a while and you don't have a sales tax permit, that would be one to go back and watch the recording of. And then throughout the rest of the year, we'll be working with the Department of Revenue to do things on e-file and pay, so how do you use their online system. Electronic filing of W2s and 1099s. So if you've got employees, those are new requirements.

Patrick Luensmann 19:34

We've got a deep look into ag this year, as there have been some recent changes into some of the taxes around the agricultural industry. We'll be doing that I think in August, and then we've got some other general tax updates. So I think part number one is we've got a whole webinar series with the Department of Revenue that can really help you navigate some of those early tax issues. We do them live, so you can join and ask questions directly to the Department of Revenue, who are awesome to be willing to do those with us.

Patrick Luensmann 20:09

Second, we offer on Source Link a service that's called the business license information center. So in Iowa, or probably anywhere, but specifically in Iowa, depending on the type of business or industry that you're in, there are different licenses, that, you know, that you have to have—permits that have to be filled out and submitted. On Source Link, we have an entire database of all of the business licenses in Iowa, up to date with contact information of who provides it, the state agency that oversees it. And we provide a person through the Iowa Economic Development Authority, her name is Christine, who will answer all of your direct questions around business licenses.

Patrick Luensmann 20:57

So you can look directly to there to see what you need or how much it will cost. And she's able to just guide you right through it. And if you don't want to do that, it's in a completely searchable database. So you can just go in, keyword search and find the business license that you're you're looking for.

Patrick Luensmann 21:16

And the last one is a big question that, you know, hopefully, nobody here has gone to law school, but business structure is one that can be confusing if you've never done it before. So we've got a whole set of instructions that just talk you through the, you know, I guess we think in layman's terms, the differences from sole props, LLC, S corps, C corps, all throughout, and then provide you with the links to the parts of the Secretary of State's website, so you can submit those directly yourself.

Patrick Luensmann 21:54

We've worked with Secretary of State as they put together their fast track filing system, that ideally, the thinking is, that if you're confident in how you want to proceed with your business in Iowa, you can go directly to the Secretary of State and file those. You know, if you do have questions, you know, be sure to touch base with your attorney. But hopefully it gives you that information ahead of time that you can ask some really good questions and know what you want to do, and how you want to structure your business to benefit you the best. So I think those are the the top three that we've got.

Steve Adams, host 22:32

Well, it's interesting, you mentioned that too, because a lot of my small business clients when they have questions about how they should set up either as a sole proprietorship or a limited liability and whether that should be a C or an S corp, or whatever it might be and what licensing they need to operate in the state of Iowa, I always send them to the Iowa Source Link page. So you know, those referrals are good, they come back, most of those clients come back say they're completely satisfied with the information they got off the site. So kudos there all the way around. Is there anything else,

Patrick, that you think that we haven't covered in this conversation that you think might be important to mention at this time?

Patrick Luensmann 23:16

You know, I think for our small businesses that are listening, that have downloaded this podcast, one, you know, thank you to you for running your business in Iowa, and, you know, at Source Link we're just excited to be able to support and connect. So we, you know, try to make it easier for all of our partners around the state. And we're not perfect either, we're continually trying to add more and more resources, people that are doing great work to support small businesses around Iowa.

Patrick Luensmann 23:51

So, you know, Source Link, we want to try and keep that information up to date, whether it's through our calendar, newsletter or content. For the most part, we're not here to promote ourselves, we're here to promote the partners and to facilitate those conversations from businesses to partners that makes it easier for, you know, Steve, what you do, or the SBDCs to spend maybe less time worrying about doing all this marketing but more time working directly with clients and, you know, producing awesome small businesses across Iowa.

Patrick Luensmann 24:31

So I think that's probably the biggest thing that we want you to take away is that Source Link is here to help you make those connections and be that sort of traffic cop. We, you know, don't provide necessarily super in-depth direct services. We want to make sure you get to the right place at the right time so you can make your business happen.

Steve Adams, host 25:00

Well, once again, our guest today has been Patrick Luensmann, senior program manager at Iowa Source Link. And if someone was interested in contacting you, I know you gave us the website address earlier, but if they have additional questions, how might people reach out to you, Patrick?

Patrick Luensmann 25:17

Yeah, absolutely. So, probably the easiest way, if you're listening to the podcast, is go out to IASourceLink.com. Up on the right hand, top right hand corner, we've got contact information, feel free to give us a call. You can email us at info@IASourceLink.com. Hopefully super easy there. Or if you want to talk more just to me, you can always find me up at the University of Northern Iowa, where it's first name Patrick dot Luensmann at uni.edu. Hopefully, Steve and the team can maybe put that in the description, because my last name is not an easy one to spell Steve, so we've got to maybe help 'em out there. So but yeah I'd be happy to answer any other questions and really help provide that right path for people.

Steve Adams, host 26:15

Well, outstanding there and again, IASourceLink.com is the website address, and believe me, folks, I speak from experience, this is a great resource for small businesses in Iowa. Well, if you have any questions about this Back to Business Iowa podcast please feel free to contact me, Steve Adams, at stadams@iastate.edu. This podcast is a collaboration between Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and the Small Business Development Centers of Iowa. We're always serving Iowans, hashtag strong Iowa. So let's get back to business, Iowa. Our justice statement is, this institution is an equal opportunity provider. For the whole non-discrimination statement or accommodation inquiries, please go to www.extension.state.edu/diversity/ext. Thanks everybody, and we'll see you next time.

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