

BACK TO BUSINESS IOWA PODCAST

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

SEASON 1 | EPISODE 25: Iowa Retail Initiative—Strategies and Best Practices

(15:51; published June 26, 2020)

Description: *Lisa Bates, field specialist II with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, joins host Steve Adams to discuss the wide range of business services available through the Iowa Retail Initiative. Several publications and best practices are discussed in this episode, including COVID-19 strategies.*

Transcript:

[music]

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. Today, our guest is Lisa Bates, field specialist from the Iowa State University College of Design, who heads up the Iowa Retail Initiative. Lisa is also a member of the Small Business Development Team here at Iowa State. In this podcast, we'll be discussing some best practices and techniques that retailers can use during these challenging times. Specifically, techniques that retailers can use to keep their customers engaged and involved in the business, even though you may be closed or limited in providing your services due to social distancing or other restrictions. Lisa, thank you for being here today.

Lisa Bates 01:45

Thank you, Steve.

Steve Adams, host 01:47

Lisa, can you first explain to our listeners what the Iowa Retail Initiative is and what is its role here in the state of Iowa?

Lisa Bates 01:55

Absolutely. So the Iowa Retail Initiative was really founded to make sure that we could address the need of support for independent retailers across the state of Iowa and address their specific needs while also helping the local support at that local level, where we have people such as chambers, economic development, other community leaders that want to help support their local retailers, we want to make sure to address their needs as well.



Steve Adams, host 02:26

So Lisa, when you came up with these best practices, and these tips, basically for retailers, how did you come up with this list?

Lisa Bates 02:35

Yeah, we really went out there as a team and started to take a look at what were some best practices happening out across the country with independent retailers, restaurants and other small businesses, to really start to bring together some things that could inspire retailers across the state of Iowa and think about their business maybe a little bit differently, how they interact with customers, how they can sell to customers, those different types of pathways to make sure even if the doors are closed or limited, then we're able to still continue business.

Steve Adams, host 03:09

I see that a lot of these tips involve the use of some form of social media. Why do you think this is so important? And where do you think retail business owners should place most of their emphasis in social media?

Lisa Bates 03:23

Yeah, social media became a big a big one for retailers, because we really couldn't see each other in person. We had to close the doors. We had to make sure that, you know, we had to make sure that we stayed at home as much as possible. So many retailers had to change their tactics. Instead of being able to see their customers every week, they went to social media, they started to communicate with their customers that way, they started to implement maybe new methods or they enhanced methods they were already using to make sure that they could continue their business.

Lisa Bates 03:55

And when you think about where should you place the most emphasis, I recommend that retailers think about their customers first, what platforms are their customers on? Where do they get their information? How can they connect with each other? And that's where the retailer should really focus their attention. Because wherever their customers are, that's how they can connect the best way, the easiest way for that method.

Steve Adams, host 04:19

So as we're starting to kind of ease into a recovery period here, should social media be considered as part of the new business as normal approach, Lisa, in your opinion?

Lisa Bates 04:30

In my opinion, it really should. I'm not sure that we're back to normal or we're going to stay back to normal for good yet. Things keep changing. We see different states have different regulations happening and our regulations change over time, and they could change back to different forms. We also want to make sure that we are safe for our employees and our customers. And there are different things that we can do for that.

Lisa Bates 04:55

But thinking about how social media can keep you in contact even if we can't be physically present together, we're able to still remain connected, and we're still able to communicate with our customers, we're still able to show them our new merchandise, we're still able to have them be a part of our business. And as we move forward, we're able, you know, to conduct business.

Steve Adams, host 05:17

I see also in your list of useful techniques for retailers, you mentioned things such as curbside pickup, expanded delivery services, coupons, or gift cards and even virtual fittings for clothing, which I find just really out of this world. But could you elaborate on why these might be so important in this environment?

Lisa Bates 05:39

There are a lot of our customers that maybe aren't as eager to get out into stores or into public areas as others. We also have many of our customers across the state that maybe are at higher risk category for COVID-19. So we want to take the chance and really learn from other retailers about some of these creative ways that they're continuing their business. I found the virtual fittings amazing as well. We even had one store that was a shoe store that did virtual fittings for their shoes, even had the customers walk as you would maybe in the store to see how your gait is, to make sure we get the right fit for you there.

Lisa Bates 06:19

These are methods that I think are great, to make sure that you're giving that great customer service that you would do in person. But you're able to do that in a different way, a creative way, even if you can't meet face to face. Some of these expanded techniques as well, they just become something that is a little bit more convenient for some customers as well. They maybe feel a little special, they're able to do things from the place of their home, and, you know, have a great time still interacting with your store, making sure that you're able to connect with them on a personal level and really give them that great customer service at the same time.

Steve Adams, host 07:03

Terrific tips there, yes. And you know, I think people are kind of enjoying that. Not that everybody's going to turn into the next Amazon, but really that ability to still interact with the customers, I think it's important. So if I'm a retail business owner, Lisa, would you give me some examples of questions you might want to ask yourself as you start thinking about best practices for a retailer?

Lisa Bates 07:26

Absolutely. I think some of those things you should start with are, who are my customers, and how can I best reach them? What do I have the ability to take on at this time? Is there some new way that I could maybe start to interact with my customers? Or maybe if I have a platform that I'm using, are there ways that I can enhance that connection, are there ways that I can enhance and use that platform in different ways? That's why we wanted to really make sure that we shared some of those creative methods to really have retailers think about what are new things, new methods that I could take from other retailers and learn from each other.

Lisa Bates 08:08

I think they need to also think about who their customers are, what's their comfort level for coming in the store? And what are some of those services that maybe you've tried out so far during COVID that your customers still would love to have? We had some retailers do really nice online platform events. And they're going to continue that, because they had such a great response from local shoppers as well as shoppers across the state that wanted to take part in those events. So they not only were able to sell merchandise, they were able to connect with additional customers across the state.

Steve Adams, host 08:45

Are there any next steps that retailers should begin to consider as we move into this recovery period?

Lisa Bates 08:53

Yes, the governor has sent out different guidelines. We're still looking at creating as much social distancing as possible, and also creating a safer environment through, the Iowa Department of Public Health has guidelines as well, for cleaning and disinfecting. Those are things that are really great that a retailer can communicate both for their employees and their customers. They can do this through things such as signage to let people know what they're doing, what their policies are, what their practices are to make sure that they create the safest environment possible for shopping.

Lisa Bates 09:28

And also you can communicate those things through your social media. But signage helps people that are maybe walking by on the street, it helps to enforce those practices for employees. And it notifies anybody that might be just stopping by your store, if you have any precautions that you want the in the customers to make, such as wearing masks, or making sure that we only have so many people in the store at a time to maintain that social distancing.

Steve Adams, host 09:57

Well, if I wanted to review these resources, Lisa, how would I find those? Is there an email address or a web address that I might be able to access in order to check out these best practice techniques?

Lisa Bates 10:09

Absolutely. These are free on our Iowa State University Community and Economic Development website under the COVID-19 resources link, and our Community and Economic Development website is extension.iastate.edu/communities.

Steve Adams, host 10:30

Excellent. So we've touched very briefly at the beginning of this interview, Lisa, but I know there are other parts of the Iowa Retail Initiative. As I pulled that up on the website, I noticed that you had programs called Champions, Coaching and Snapshot. Could you give us a little brief explanation of each one of those for our audience?

Lisa Bates 10:53

Absolutely. So for any community wanting to become a part of the entire Iowa Retail Initiative, we require that representation come to a Champion session. Champion sessions are geared toward those leaderships, the leadership in the local community that supports retail, that plans retail on an ongoing basis. So champions in the community we think of as Main Street coordinators, we think of as chambers of commerce, economic development organizations. And there may even be more grassroots organizations to really focus on the retail district in your community.

Lisa Bates 11:35

So we start off the program there, working with champions to really provide a great foundation that they can use in data, tools, resources and support their local retailers on an ongoing basis. Once the community goes through the Champions session, they can move on to Coaching or Snapshot, and I'll talk about Snapshot here first. Snapshot is again geared toward those in the community that plan for and need to understand where they are as a retail district as a whole.

Lisa Bates 12:07

So the Snapshot is a train the trainer program where we use a place-based app program that actually provides the ability to take an inventory of your current existing conditions of your retail district. And you're able to blend that data collected with other community-wide information, and be able to really understand where you are at this existing time. What blocks maybe are doing better than others? Where might you need to pinpoint resources? What could have a more snowballing effect, where if you

start some programs or some initiatives to get moving, where do you want to start as a community to enhance your retail district?

Lisa Bates 12:51

And then finally the Coaching session, the Coaching sessions are directly for the individual independent retailer. We have sessions that cover customer service, entrepreneurship, and also retail store design. So we do sessions with retail owners and retail employees to really make sure that we can foster the best practices. We want to make sure that they understand what barriers maybe they face. What are their goals for the future? And what can we do together in a coaching session to make sure that they move forward and they have the best outcome for their retail store as possible? So those are the three components that make up the Iowa Retail Initiative program. And again, like you said, Steve, there's additional details on our website, the CED website, under programs.

Steve Adams, host 13:50

Excellent, but again, you've got to take that Champion session first, and that's for those community leaders. So let's say I'm a chamber director someplace tonight, and I want to sponsor a Champions session. How might these communities, or how much might my community, reach out to you to get a Champion session in place?

Lisa Bates 14:11

Absolutely. My contact information is on the website, but my phone number is 515-357-8185. Or you can send me an email at lbates@iastate.edu, and I'll get right back to you.

Steve Adams, host 14:30

Operators are standing by.

Lisa Bates 14:31

That's right [laughter].

Steve Adams, host 14:32

Well, I want to thank you, Lisa, for taking the time to visit with us today. And we certainly appreciate all the work you're doing to assist businesses, small businesses and retailers across the state. 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 Extension and Outreach and the Iowa Small Business Development Centers. Always serving Iowans, hashtag strong Iowa. Our justice statement is as follows. This institution is an equal opportunity provider. For the full non-discrimination statement or accommodations inquiries, please go to www.extension.iastate.edu/diversity/ext. Again, thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.

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