

2.9 Roles of SBDC's, Business Agents, and Other Business Counselors

“One-stop shopping centers” have become popular concepts for customers in recent years. Various businesses such as retail sales at drug stores, convenience gas stations, discount shopping centers, and malls have adopted this concept. For many of the same reasons, the small business owner may find the concept of one-stop shopping for business assistance to be attractive.

In our efforts to provide educational assistance to businesses, our ability to serve clients with a broader range of information and education may be a key to our overall effectiveness and the future of our programs. The problem with continuing to diversify our programs is that staff are faced with an ever-increasing burden of information and programs to support. A logical solution to the problem is to form partnerships in the delivery of a greater diversity of education and technical services that will satisfy our clients.

One of the prevailing concerns for small businesses today is that of regulations, and environmental regulations in particular. This applies to all businesses, and is a specific concern of manufacturers. Environmental regulations exist because our businesses generate wastes. The message that businesses should comply with environmental regulations is not always well understood or appreciated by businesses. Cost is a more universal consideration from the client perspective. Waste is business cost equated with inefficiency. The opportunity for the counselor is to help business understand that waste costs can be a critical consideration to the success of the business. The question is how can business counselors provide that information without adding a new layer of responsibility. **The answer is partnerships.**

This guidebook and the companion video tapes were developed to foster a partnership concept between Small Business Development Centers, other business agents and counselors, and waste-reduction specialists such as the Solid and Hazardous Waste Education Center. SBDC's and other counselors have better access and credibility with small businesses, while SHWEC has the waste reduction expertise. Each program has in the past served clients independently. The partnership of SBDC and SHWEC offers expanded service access to clients without adding new program responsibilities.

This partnership serves the general small business community and parallels the Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Partnership (WMEP) which also includes SBDC's and SHWEC. WMEP is a broad partnership of the Wisconsin manufacturing community with the University of Wisconsin Extension and the Wisconsin Technical College System. It employs field agents who provide a menu of general services, but it relies on an extensive network of partner institutions along with their faculty and staff to bring the appropriate expertise to meet the needs of the client.

In this and the WMEP partnership, the customer should be able to access a wider array of educational and technical services without having to identify all the independent sources. The

partnerships bring together informed counselors, agents, and specialists who can provide their expertise and expert referrals for the client.

In this case, the counselor can be an informed first source regarding the economic impacts and opportunities related to waste generation by businesses. The counselor can help clients understand the implications of waste on the bottom line. They can then refer the client to SHWEC or other appropriate contacts for technical or regulatory assistance.

While a counselor is not expected to be an expert on waste reduction, the extent to which a counselor can get involved on waste issues with the client will vary. This guidebook offers flexibility to the counselor in that role. For those who have the time, interest, and appropriate client contacts, there is significant opportunity for involvement. This has been shown in county agent programs. For others with limited time but who want to do as much as possible, more of the effort can be referred to partners. In both cases, having a basic understanding or awareness is key to providing the client with a more complete and satisfying service.