



## Sydney Morning Herald

Thursday 26/08/2010

Page: 1  
Section: Special Report  
Region: Sydney, AU  
Circulation: 211066  
Type: Capital City Daily  
Size: 370.17 sq.cms.



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# All the help you need to think big

Getting involved in the activities of NSW's month for small enterprises could make a major difference to your bottom line, write **Melinda Ham** and **Anneli Knight**

Everyone knows small businesses are important. As well as providing us with many of the goods and services we need for everyday life, they help drive the Australian economy.

But ponder for a second this remarkable figure. Australian Bureau of Statistics research suggests NSW's 650,000 small businesses make up a whopping 96 per cent of the state's business sector.

There's an excellent chance you or a close family member are directly involved in a small business. They generate millions of jobs and an enormous chunk of the revenue flowing through Sydney and the rest of the state. So it's concerning that so many small enterprises are doing it tough.

The chief executive of the Council of Small Business of Australia, Peter Strong, says confidence is down among consumers. Retail and tourism-based small enterprises, in particular, are facing challenges.

"Basically, people aren't spending," Strong says. "They've lost confidence, they're not sure of where the future is going."

There is also uncertainty over the impact on business of a reconfigured federal government, of exchange rates and a fluctuating Australian dollar.

It's timely, then, that NSW's annual month-long program of small-business workshops and seminars, Small Business September, is themed Connect for Profit. Businesses are being encouraged to network and find ways to increase their productivity and profitability.

"Businesses across NSW will have access to free and low-cost events that will address priority issues for [their growth]," says NSW Small Business Minister, Frank Terenzini.

Now in its 11th year, the program brings together more than 300 events in 14 regions across the state.

This includes sessions on how to build a high-value business that is saleable, getting a better handle on tax, improving sales and testing a new idea before investing in it. Events take the form of seminars, webinars, workshops and debates.

Topics covered include green sustainability, safety, technology, social media, home-based businesses and start-ups. "There are two primary beneficiaries of Small Business September," Terenzini says.

"Any business – large or small – that has a service or product that assists small businesses. These businesses can become partners and host a useful, educational event in their local area. The second is every small-business owner or manager who only too

often thinks it's time to work on the business rather than in it – September is that time."

One of the more unusual events will be a debate entitled "Man versus the Machine" at Small Business September's launch at Lower Town Hall on Wednesday. Experts will discuss the merits of new media marketing using tools such as Facebook and Twitter versus traditional methods.

The MC will be the co-host of Channel Seven's *Sunrise*, David Koch. The following day at the MLC Centre will be devoted to start-ups. The market development manager for the Department of Industry & Investment, Elke Davis, says participants will learn "the pitfalls and joys" of launching a small business and what tools are available. This event will also be held in Camden.

Digital Days, to be held in the Sydney central business district and on the central coast, will show how clever technology use can lead to more profit. Experts will offer information and advice on digital direct mail, social media, e-commerce and mobile marketing.

Sydney CBD cafe owner Angela Vithoulkas, who is a "champion" of Small Business September, says the events are invaluable.

"Usually, small-business owners can't afford to pay for this kind of advice from experts," she says.

"But at Small Business September there are more than 300 events, most of them free. They aren't just on generic topics but really cutting-edge stuff; exactly what small businesses need."

The owner of the Newcastle-based freight-forwarding company Scorpion International, Leigh Bryant, says the regions are also catered to during the month.

"If you are out in western Sydney or in Orange or Illawarra, you can feel quite alone in small business," she says. "Small Business September has a lot to offer us in regional areas and networking with other businesses is one of the best parts. I encourage everyone to choose a topic and physically attend."

Regional events vary from home-based business networking in Ballina and an industrial relations workshop in Batemans Bay, to tax basics in Wagga Wagga and workplace safety essentials in Lismore.

Small-business owners may worry about taking time away from their work to attend but the investment will be worthwhile, Bryant says. "I have reinvented so many wheels; if I had used the resources available, I would not have wasted so much time."

While most events on offer are free, you do have to register. See [smallbusinessmonth.nsw.gov.au](http://smallbusinessmonth.nsw.gov.au) or phone 1300 661 539.

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