

No Wrong Doors: For entrepreneurs, one door opens to vast network of resources

By Kate Arno, Maine SBDC

Trina Beaulier had just retired from a successful career as a Maine educator and was thinking about new adventures. Brooke Ligon, now living in Hancock County, was a scientist and researcher at Tufts University. When both decided to flex their entrepreneurial muscles, they knocked first on the doors of the Maine Small Business Development Centers. From there, they built a network of support and assistance to launch their dreams.

From Tufts Research to Hancock, Maine

Ligon actually first "knocked" on Maine SBDC's door via e-mail in 2006 from her Tufts University lab to a Maine SBDC-certified business counselor in Ellsworth. The counselor reviewed Ligon's Maine Technology Institute draft grant proposal which, when approved, helped her establish her own lab in Hancock, Mitokine Bioscience.

Ligon then decided to pursue larger federal Small Business Innovation Research grants, necessary to commercialize a new invention based on her diabetes research. She contacted Eastern Maine Development Corporation and began working with Ann McAlhany, a Maine SBDC business counselor there.

"At the time, I had no idea just how much networking I would be doing," said Ligon, "but gradually, I acquired an entire team of experts to support me."

For example, McAlhany soon realized Ligon needed expertise in intellectual property and called in her associate, Meriby Sweet, center director of the Maine SBDC's technology-focused Maine Small Business & Technology Development Center. Sweet worked with Ligon on several issues and introduced her to Leonard Agneta at the Maine Patent Office in Orono. Sweet also brought in Diane Ray, director of the River Valley Technology Center in Rumford, who had pharmaceuticals expertise.

"Bringing a new technology to the marketplace is a very arduous process, but the rewards not only accrue to the inventor, but to society as well," said Sweet. "I think it's important for the entrepreneur to know that no matter what door you start with, you will find help because here in Maine, we work together to bring together the best possible combination of resources."

From Educator to Chocolate Entrepreneur

Trina Beaulier says it began as "a quest for the quintessential chocolate experience." She took old

family recipes and launched Simply Divine Brownies in Brunswick in 2004. Since then, she has expanded her business to include a new production facility in Freeport and a new retail location in Brunswick, which opened March 10. Along the way, she's managed to get her treats into the world-renowned Oscar gift bags and to get noticed as a Rachael Ray "snack of the day."

Beaulier's association with Maine SBDC started when she consulted with John Entwistle, director of the Maine SBDC service center at the University of Southern Maine. Entwistle helped Beaulier prepare for her first appearance at the New England Products Trade Show in Portland, a premiere wholesale event where more than 300 manufacturers of distinctive giftware and specialty food products from throughout New England. A 20-year consultant with the show, Entwistle knew it was important for Beaulier to use this showcase, and advised her about creating booth signage, layout, lighting, and display; sales techniques; how to greet and qualify buyers; and other issues.

To keep pace with growth, Beaulier wanted to continually improve her production processes. To do so, 15 of her staff went through Lean Enterprise Training, a program offered by Maine Manufacturing Extension Partnership that teaches cutting-edge efficiency procedures.

Beaulier also works with Meriby Sweet, director of the Maine Small Business & Technology Development Center, the tech focus unit of the Maine SBDC. Sweet is helping her revise her business plan to keep pace with the growth of her company.

Beaulier has also received two grant awards from the Maine Technology Institute. One grant helped fund her first gantry, an electronic brownie cutter; the other helped her commercialize her products.

Sweet has also referred Beaulier to the Maine International Trade Center, a Portland organization that helps Maine businesses access foreign markets. Beaulier is now learning about international trade, readying her business for another growth spurt.

"We have been introduced to so many things that we never thought we would be a part of," said Meggan Beaulier, Beaulier's daughter and business partner.

"We like to think there are no wrong doors here in Maine," said Sweet, who is also Maine SBDC's interim state director. "Whether you start with Maine SBDC or wherever, we'll get you where you need to be and find you the resources you need to succeed with your small business."

