

SURVEY OF RURAL CHALLENGES 2015

WHAT SMALL TOWN PEOPLE SEE AS THEIR BIGGEST CHALLENGES

AND WHAT TOPICS THEY MOST WANT HELP WITH



SMALLBIZSURVIVAL.COM/RURALCHALLENGE

When you ask small town people what challenges they want help with, the responses provide an interesting insight into rural areas today.

SmallBizSurvival.com conducted a survey among subscribers and visitors to the site during 2015, receiving over 200 individual responses.

RURAL COMMUNITY CHALLENGES

Top five concerns at the community-wide level:

1. Losing young people
2. Downtown is dead
3. No one shops in town
4. Missing out on tourism opportunities
5. No businesses in town

Respondents often chose these topics together as a set; they went hand in hand. It shows that many small towns face the challenges of creating and sustaining both business and activity in town.

SMALL-TOWN BUSINESS OWNER CHALLENGES

Over $\frac{3}{4}$ of those surveyed identified as current or prospective small business owners.

Top concerns among business owners:

1. Tried opening later hours without success
2. Marketing isn't working
3. People want to pick their brain for free
4. Need help but cannot hire
5. Need an idea to start a business

TOP CHALLENGES FOR SMALL DOWNTOWNS

While the survey did not ask a separate question for challenges in downtown areas, many of the challenges deal directly with compact business districts. Top challenges cited for downtown business areas:

1. Creating a lively downtown filled with prosperous businesses and community activities
2. Effectively marketing small businesses
3. Building better cooperation among businesses, leaders and community members

OTHER RURAL CHALLENGES

Taking the structured and open-ended responses together, several themes emerged where rural people most feel the need for help.

1. **Lack of cooperation and negativity among local leaders** was the most commonly-mentioned challenge, appearing in more than 12% of responses. Personal agendas, local organizations that don't work together and infighting hold communities back. One respondent summed it up, citing "obstinacy and stubborn pessimism."
2. **Lack of cooperation among local businesses.** Participants mentioned competitiveness, antagonism between unrelated businesses, lack of participation in group promotions, difficulty coordinating marketing, and the need to pool resources. Even business staff parking in spots meant for customers was mentioned.
3. **Marketing issues for small businesses** were the next most often mentioned topic. Competing locally, nationally and online is challenging. Several people mentioned the difficulty of keeping up with changes in marketing. Reduced effectiveness of newspaper advertising, the fast rate of change of online marketing, and difficulties in reaching customers today leave some businesses at a loss.
4. The fourth most-mentioned challenge was **finding and keeping volunteers.** Changes in the way people get involved in their community are causing a shortage of unpaid help for traditional organizations.
5. **Common business weaknesses** made up the other most-mentioned issue. Businesses require support to address specific problems that threaten their operation. Businesses not staying open past 5pm, and generally not presenting themselves professionally or competitively were common threads.

WHAT THE SURVEY DIDN'T SAY

The responses from rural people broke down some prevalent small-town stereotypes.

Challenges for small downtowns don't call for outside savior businesses:

- Only three respondents mentioned a business gap, or a specific business they felt their community or downtown needed. No one mentioned needing a national chain or franchise business to improve their town.

Rural community challenges aren't as poverty- and job-driven as you might think:

- While national media coverage of small towns often focuses on poverty and towns that have suffered the loss of a major employer or industry, survey responses didn't focus on these. The least-selected choice for challenges was that their town had suffered "a terrible blow." Only three people mentioned poverty.
- A lack of jobs was only mentioned by 2 people, and neither of them mentioned attempting to recruit an outside business to bring in more jobs. More people mentioned a lack of available workforce than mentioned lack of jobs.

Small town business challenges are more about buildings and marketing than about loans:

- Interestingly, difficulty securing a business loan ranked low in these responses. The relative lack of small business lending is often cited as holding back small businesses. More people cited trouble finding a usable building than trouble finding a loan.
- It's not true that everyone knows everyone in a small town. Marketing was the second-most-often-chosen challenge, and was also a common topic in the open-ended section where 10 people re-emphasized their marketing challenges.

THE WRITE-IN CANDIDATES

When given open space to mention any other challenges, rural people shared many additional areas where they need help. Here are a few of the most compelling, in their own words.

- We have a lot of dilapidated buildings in our downtown, many of which are owned by 2 families who are pack rats and have them filled with junk and garbage. They never plan to open these as business and it makes our town look terrible.
- The 'competiveness' of small town business is killing me! It doesn't even matter if businesses are in completely different lines of work - in this town it feels like they are out to see the others fail.

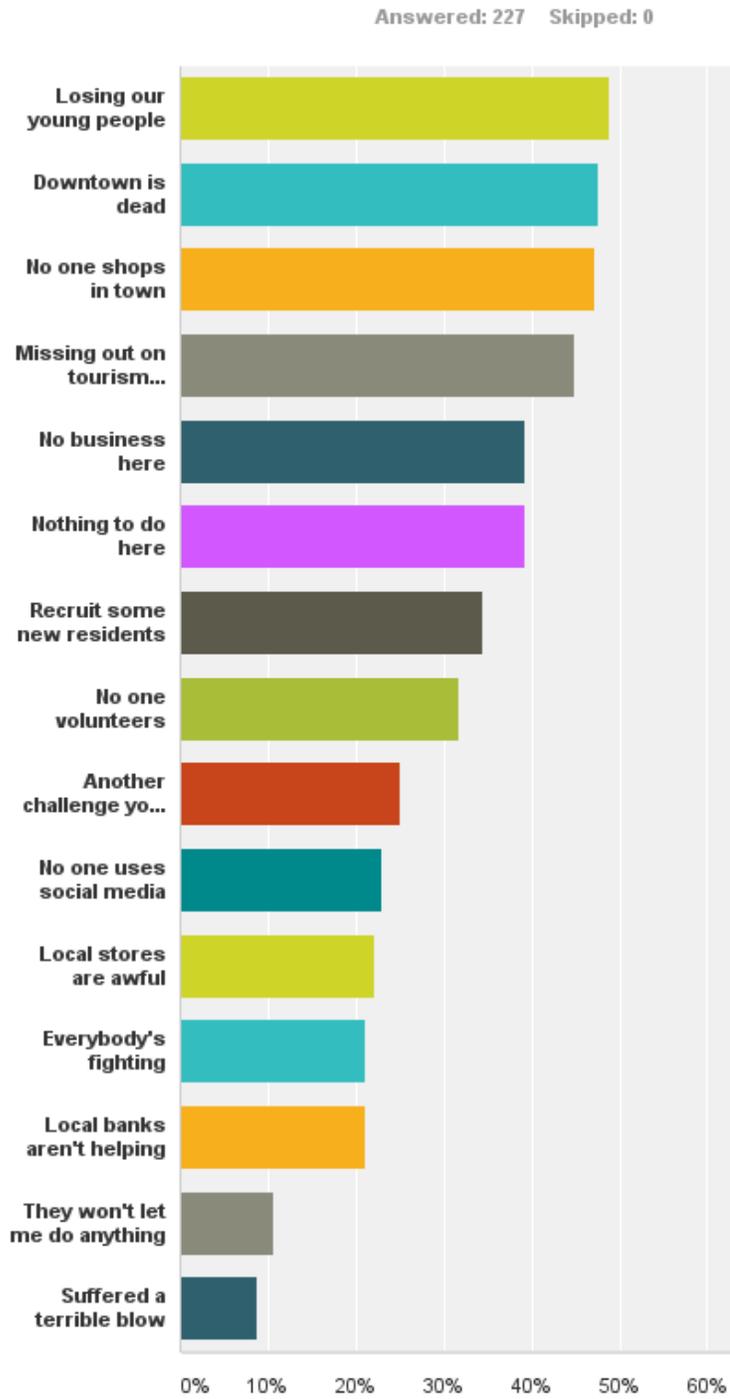
- Our small town has an issue with businesses failing. The only mainstays are 4 consignment/thrift shops (one of which is owned by my family). There is no support from local government. Such a cute downtown area-but Main St (on a major route)-just dead. Help!
- We inherited our Moms run down deeply in debt café and are trying to keep it going. My husband works full time and I am a stay at home Mom with three kids. We need to keep it afloat in order to make her house payment so we don't lose her house as well. We need help!!!!
- Retail is changing rapidly. First came Walmart....now Amazon. What can Refill old small downtowns?
- Too many personal agendas.
- Our town has started building a bit of momentum, but I'm concerned individuals' obstinacy and stubborn pessimism will stand in the way. How do we get them to become part of the solution instead of part of the problem?
- I'd love to hear about how other small towns have helped their community leaders get over the fear of failure. It has certainly hindered growth and development in our community. How do we best encourage people to take more risks? Be more creative with spaces?
- Competing with Online competitors and trying to attract enough visitors/customers to our hospitality business to make it viable.
- It changes so fast & there's so much technical jargon for SEO/ websites/mobile that I end up feeling stupid and end up ignoring it all.
-we're an abundant community... food, skills, culture wise etc ...How do we access that abundance
- Help! I started a non-profit with a goal in mind and awesome ideas but my board won't listen to me and have taken over. Now it looks nothing like I wanted it to be.
- Help! The same people in town are volunteering for everything. How do we recruit a variety of volunteers?
- potential employees are very limited? How do I weed out the unreliaables?

ACTION STEPS

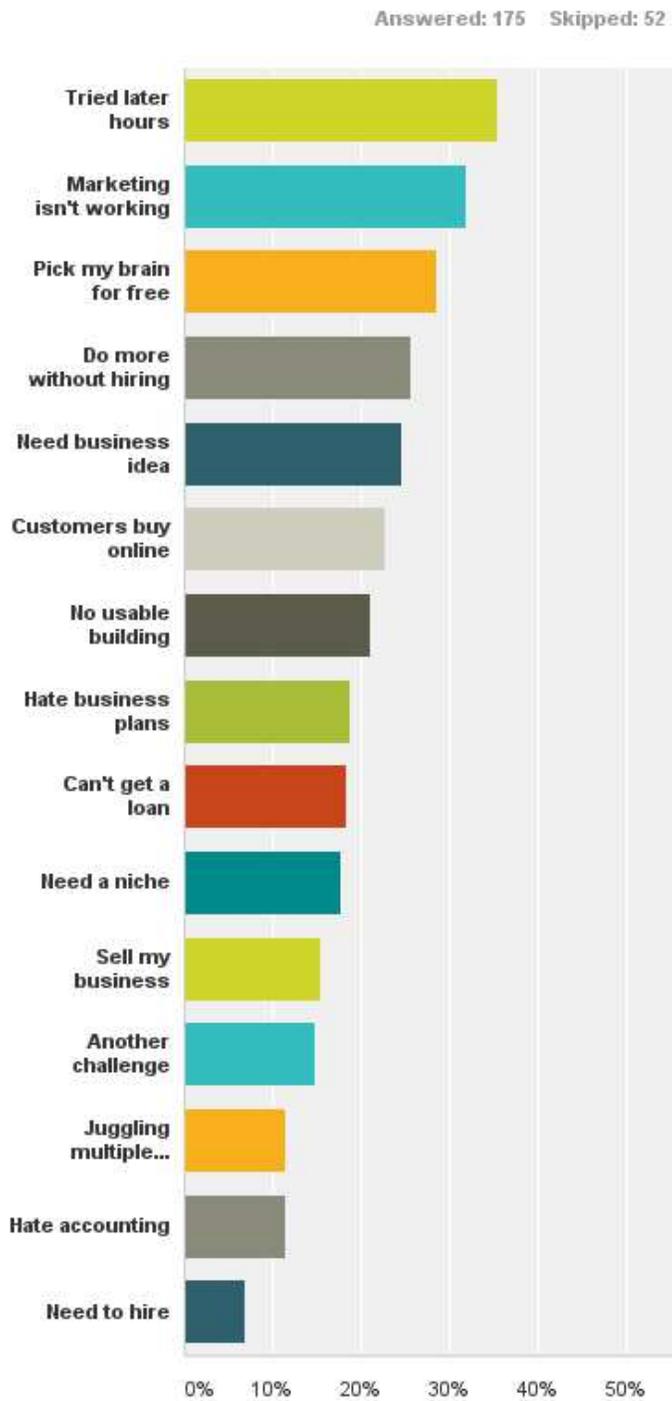
A set of action steps created in response to this survey data is available at no cost to subscribers at smallbizsurvival.com/ruralchallenge

THE BREAKDOWN

Questions presented a list of topics people would like to have SmallBizSurvival.com write about. Responses to the first question reveal areas that most challenge rural people about their community and downtown.



The second question focused on the areas people most want help with for their rural small businesses.



FULL TEXT OF QUESTIONS

Which of these challenges would you be super excited if I wrote more about facing them? Pick as many as you would be thrilled to learn more about.

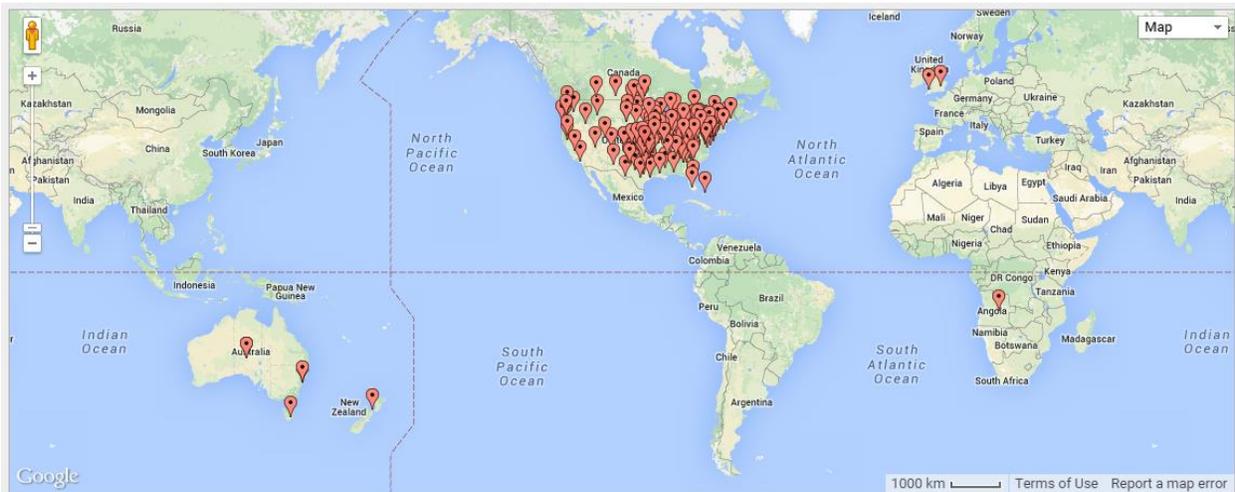
- Help, our downtown is dead! How can we fill empty buildings and make it a living place?
- Help, no one shops in town! How can we get people to shop local first?
- Help, I'm the only one who cares! No one volunteers! How can we get more people involved?
- Help, our local stores are awful! How can we get them to get with the times?
- Help, there's no business here! How can we grow our own small businesses?
- Help, my town is really messed up! Everybody's fighting! What can we do about this?
- Help, there's nothing to do here! How can we get more going on?
- Help, no one uses social media here! How can we get people online?
- Help, we're missing out on tourism opportunities! How can we get people to take advantage of these opportunities?
- Help, we're losing our young people! How can we keep them here?
- Help, they won't let me do what we need! Why won't they do what I tell them they should?
- Help, we need new to recruit some new residents! How can we draw them in?
- Help, our local banks aren't helping! Where are our small businesses supposed to find the money?
- Help, our town has suffered a terrible blow! How will we ever get past it?
- Help, we have another challenge you didn't list! It's like this...

Which of these business challenges would you be super excited if I wrote about them? Choose as many as you would be thrilled to learn more about.

- Help, we can't get a loan! Where do we find the money?
- Help, I want to start a business, but I don't know what business to start! How do I get an idea?
- Help, I kinda know what business I want to be in, but I don't know what to focus on. Can you help me find my niche?
- Help, I tried being open later hours, but no one showed up! How do I get people to shop later?
- Help, I'm juggling multiple businesses! How do I keep them all in the air?
- Help, I can't find a usable building in this town! Where can I start my business?
- Help, everyone wants to pick my brain for free! How do I ever get paid for my work?
- Help, I have no idea how to keep books! How do I stay in business when I hate doing the accounting?
- Help, I need help, but I can't hire! How do I get more done without hiring an employee?
- Help, I need to hire, but I've never done that before. What the heck do I do first?
- Help, I need to sell my business! Where do I find a buyer in this small town?
- Help, customers love our stuff, but they buy it online instead of from us! How can we stop them?
- Help, I hate business plans! Don't make me do one!
- Help, I'm doing all this marketing, but it doesn't do any good! No one is listening to me!
- Help, I have another challenge. It's like this...

THE NUMBERS

A total of 227 responses were collected online between 4/12/2015 and 5/11/2015 from subscribers and visitors to SmallBizSurvival.com. Respondents identified themselves as rural. 175 identified themselves as business owners by responding to the business challenges question. Participants included 206 from the USA, 11 from Canada and 10 from other international locations.



PRESS ROOM

The online pressroom for this survey data is at SmallBizSurvival.com/ruralchallenge

ABOUT SMALL BIZ SURVIVAL

SmallBizSurvival.com is focused on rural small business. It was founded January 14, 2006 by Becky McCray from a small town in Oklahoma. It has been ranked in the top 30 small business blogs worldwide by Invesp BlogRank and BizHummm. McCray has been named one of the Power Players in Technology Business Media in 2013 and a Small Business Influencer Journalist in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014.

As a speaker, [Becky McCray](#) delivers presentations and programs that give rural people practical steps they can implement right now to shape the future of their community. Her down-to-earth perspective as a rural business owner connects immediately to small town people across the US, Canada and other international audiences.