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A groundswell of support for Black-owned small businesses is giving National Black Business Month increased clout, and it's evident everywhere from a South Carolina cafe counter to TikTok to the federal government.

Among 2019's 5.8 million U.S. employers – businesses with more than one employee – only 2.3%, or 134,567, were Black owned, according to Brookings. At the same time, Black people comprised 14.2% of the population. The percentage of Black-owned businesses grows considerably when solo entrepreneurs are added to the mix. The federal Small Business Administration identified women of color as the largest segment of new small business owners and operators in recent measurements of small business growth.

Black-owned businesses are glad for the recognition, and many owners report benefits from the month-long commemoration.

Since its 2004 founding by historian John William Templeton and engineer Frederick Jordan, their commemoration of a special month was meant to drive policy affecting African American businesses. Now, 18 years later and halfway through the commemoration month, Black-owned businesses are a focus of federal policy and consumers are increasingly intentional about supporting Black-owned small businesses.

At a Feb. 17 event honoring Martin Luther King Jr., Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said: "From Reconstruction to Jim Crow to the present day, our economy has never worked fairly for Black Americans or, really, for any American of color." Such public acknowledgement of the structural handicaps Black business owners face is key to creating a climate that enables Black-owned small business to thrive. Still, challenges remain.

Andrena Mullins – owner of LilJazZi’s Cafe in Florence, South Carolina – said access to capital remains the greatest challenge for Black entrepreneurs. She opened her restaurant in 2020 using capital she’d raised from the sale of She bootstrapped a vending machine business in 2014 on her own and then sold it, after failing to get support from banks and other lenders. “Everything that I’ve done has been my own personal capital, Mullins said at the end of a busy lunch rush. “After you get rejected so many times, you don’t even try; it’s going to be a “no.””

Her DIY sensibility is inherent, but additionally, her supportive customer base and expanding network of Black small business owners has helped LilJazZi’s thrive – often specifically because it’s a Black-owned business. “You have a portion of African Americans that are all about supporting Black business,” Mullins said. “A lot of time, they say they’re supporting ‘my people.’ But with my white customers, in this area, it’s like, a thing now. They recognize you as a minority business and talk about it.”

Her cafe has become a haven for several predominantly white book clubs, and Mullins sometimes opens early to enable certain groups to meet before they go to work themselves. “Really, it’s not about color. It’s more about getting good food and being treated well,” she said.

Across the country in Portland, Oregon, Jesse Hyatt, co-founder and executive director of the city’s Black American Chamber of Commerce, said the rising support he’s seen in one of the nation’s whitest large cities is very much about color and that consumers and governments are using their economic clout to back up support of racial justice. “The celebration of Black businesses has waned, historically, until very recently,” said the Portland native. “Look at the ’80s, ’90s and 2000s, and the attention wasn’t there. We have to look to the post-George Floyd. era. His murder put a lot of emphasis on eyes being opened, and that led to identifying businesses that need to be supported.”

Hyatt added: “We have seen a lot of the local government agencies and business-supporting nonprofits start and continue to emphasize the importance of supporting Black-owned businesses.” Hyatt counts about 150 businesses as chamber members. The largest concentration is care homes for the elderly and related healthcare businesses, followed by food-and-beverage businesses, from food trucks in the city’s ubiquitous outdoor dining scene to sit-down restaurants. Other sectors include construction, small vehicle fleets in the transportation business, and health and beauty.

Hyatt said the pandemic catalyzed the city’s Black-owned business community, which worked with the chamber on COVID relief efforts like distributing personal protective equipment and administering direct relief grants. “I have seen some just beautiful examples of our community coming together during the pandemic,” he said.

The SBA is an enthusiastic supporter of Black Business Month. “There’s a lot of importance to [Black Business Month] and Black History Month [in February] in highlighting Black-owned businesses, from our mom-and-pops to contractors that do business with the federal government,” said Ted James, SBA regional administrator for Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, New Mexico and Oklahoma. “The agency is recognizing it and highlighting it with our social media channels,” he said, “and the fact is that although it’s not a presidentially declared month, as an agency, we’ve made it extremely important to us.”

From a practical standpoint, that often means using community-based channels to make Black entrepreneurs aware of the SBA’s own loan programs, providing support for accessing capital and writing business plans, and connecting new business owners with advisors and professional networks. That means working with historically Black colleges and universities and expanding the SBA’s Community Navigators program, which engages community organizations like the National Urban League that have strong connections to aspiring entrepreneurs of color. “It’s important to get information to the trust brokers in the community, and those partnerships help get us more trust than just approaching them as a federal agency,” he said. “There are businesses that need the technical assistance we provide and need to know about access to capital, and this administration has been really diligent in promoting that access to capital, as well as access to information.”

Even social media platform TikTok is actively supporting programs for Black-owned businesses this month, according to the Atlanta Small Business Network. The company is featuring videos of Black-owned businesses, particularly those affected by COVID-19. TikTok also recently launched the third round of the Support Black Businesses accelerator program, which offers winners educational resources and networking opportunities on the TikTok app. The company reported a strong response to its initial call for applications, which will be accepted until early September. TikTok started its program in 2020.

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