FIELD
at the Aspen Institute

Distance Learning and the Changing Face of Business Development Services

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Introduction

A long-time challenge facing microenterprise programs is how to reach out to larger numbers of entrepreneurs efficiently despite the distance in proximity to a program office. A common strategy, for both rural and urban programs, has been to grow geographically — establishing branch or regional offices wherever potential clients work and reside in numbers. While the bricks and mortar strategy has many obvious benefits (local credibility, increased market knowledge, and enhanced customer service being just a few), it also carries some substantial drawbacks, not the least of which is cost. Although these drawbacks do not mean that practitioners will not continue to expand their physical presence, there are compelling reasons to look more closely at distance learning.

First, on the negative side, there are the costs involved as programs grow their physical presence, as well as the decreasing ability of economically hard-pressed people to travel to set events or trainings. On the positive side, greater availability of computers with high-speed Internet access, and the prevalence of hand-held devices, even among the disadvantaged, makes other forms of dissemination possible. The increasing ease of connectivity in many settings also allows for the delivery of richer material than in the past. As technology has evolved dramatically in the last three to five years, programs are becoming cognizant of the customer's desire for access to content and services on a 24/7 basis. As many microenterprise programs evolve, they confront questions as to how these "distance" strategies will grow and evolve in tandem with their traditional products and services, and how they will contribute to their overall impact, sustainability and reach.

To better inform microenterprise practitioners as they integrate these practices into their program, FIELD undertook a scan of practice to understand and document both the breadth of work going on in the field, and promising directions taken by practitioners. The scan sought to explore questions such as

- What is the current state of practice of distance business development services (BDS) within the microenterprise field? What early innovations are emerging?

- What is early practice revealing about the characteristics of clients who access training and technical assistance this way?

- What mix of independent and guided education is most appropriate for customers and best leverages an organization's skilled staff?

- What is the right type of technology to use for what organizations are trying to accomplish?

- How are programs learning about what clients are interested in and how to best engage them?

- And, how do organizations measure the uptake and effectiveness of these services?

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The scan draws upon information from members of the Scale Academy for Microenterprise Development[1] that have been engaged in distance BDS work for several years. While ACEnet, WESST and MicroMentor have all taken varied directions with their distance BDS work, some learning is beginning to emerge with regard to: the tools and content that best serve their constituencies; the technologies that best suit their organizations' purposes in implementing this type of work; integrating user feedback into the design and implementation of distance-learning efforts; and building a base of active users. The scan also draws upon data from a survey of microenterprise organizations across the United States that explored their work and strategies in this distance-based area of work, and from subsequent interviews with some of the surveyed organizations that gathered additional information regarding their distance-learning efforts.

About this Research

This scan of practice is part of an ongoing research project by FIELD that examines how U.S. microenterprise development organizations (MDOs) can scale up their Business Development Services (BDS) in order to serve many more microentrepreneurs, and to serve them effectively. In this project, BDS are defined as non-financial resources including, but not limited to, training and technical assistance, which microenterprise organizations provide to help entrepreneurs start and grow their businesses. Scale is defined as serving large numbers of individuals. In addition, the definition of scale, as applied in this project, also incorporates the concepts of increased market penetration and of achieving economies in service delivery, which, in turn, can lead to greater organizational sustainability and deepened social impact. This BDS research project is supported with funding from the U.S. Small Business Administration's PRIME (Program for Investment in Micro-entrepreneurs) program, as well as with funding provided by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and Citi Foundation in support of FIELD's Scale Academy for Microenterprise Development.

Context: Using Technology to Scale Services

"Distance Business Development Services" is defined here as business-related content or assistance delivered via remote technologies, including phone, internet, or television. Examples of these services include online seminars or courses; online worksheets, tools, tips or fact sheets; counseling, coaching or mentoring delivered via phone, internet and/or email; podcasts that provide business content; and blogs and social networking sites that offer information and dialogue on business issues. These diverse methods reflect varying active or passive approaches to client engagement. For example, on the passive end, content can simply be made available or accessed through online technologies, whereas webinars that provide space for dialogue with experts or peers are on the more active end of the spectrum. Social media also has the potential to enable discussion, collaboration and learning among users.

Jeffrey Bradach's article, *Scaling Impact*, discusses how nonprofits are employing a number of technology-based strategies to scale their impact without dramatically increasing their costs (converting 'bricks to clicks') through the creation of tools or platforms that users can readily adopt. Bradach also notes several examples of organizations that are using social media to share

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[1] The Scale Academy for Microenterprise Development provides grant funding, peer learning events, and technical assistance to a set of high-performing microenterprise organizations that have demonstrated a commitment to scaling-up operations to serve more clients. For more information see http://fieldus.org/Projects/ScaleAcademy.html

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knowledge, build networks and campaigns, and collaborate.[2]   In many respects, the Scale Academy members and survey data highlighted here are reflective of larger trends among nonprofits attempting to scale their impact. Some are leveraging newer social media tools to build upon their business development work, others have created technology platforms, and all are developing or adapting content to reach both new clients and old.

Survey Data on Distance BDS in Microenterprise Organizations

As part of this research project on Scaling-Up Business Development Services, FIELD distributed a survey to those MDOs responding to its 2009 microenterprise census that indicated that they provide business development services (BDS). The survey solicited responses from those engaged in providing distance-based BDS work, with the purpose of gathering information about the nature of these distance BDS services and their role within the microenterprise program, particularly as it related to the issue of scale. FIELD received a total of 69 responses from individual organizations involved in this work.

The organizational profile of survey respondents that provide these distance-based services is quite diverse. FIELD had 2010 census data for 65 percent of those responding to the survey. Of those MDO's, the range in staff size was 0 to 65 full-time employees (median 4 FTE), with operating budgets from $0 to $9.1 million (median $352,000). Moreover, roughly half provide microloans in addition to business training and technical assistance. This suggests that MDO's, both large and small, and both lenders and trainers are experimenting with providing these types of services.

What's Being Provided: Breadth of Work in Distance BDS

Fast-paced technology changes have nudged many providers of traditional business development services to introduce distance-based practice, and, as a result, microenterprise practitioners are engaging clients in increasingly diverse ways. ***Survey respondents noted a range of distance BDS activity, from simply providing their materials (tips, worksheets, factsheets) online, to offering webinars, blogs, podcasts and videos of their business coursework. Additionally, ninety-one percent of respondents engage in counseling/coaching/mentoring via phone and email.*** Perhaps not surprisingly, the most frequently-offered distance services – counseling/coaching/mentoring and posting of materials and worksheets – are those that presumably require the least adaptation of an organization's face-to-face services. Regardless of the format used, distance BDS providers are implementing these practices to bring down costs and increase staff efficiencies. And, they are adapting practice through consistent evaluation of user feedback.

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[2] Jeffrey Bradach, "Scaling Impact," Stanford Social Innovation Review, Summer 2010: 27.

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What services are you currently providing?
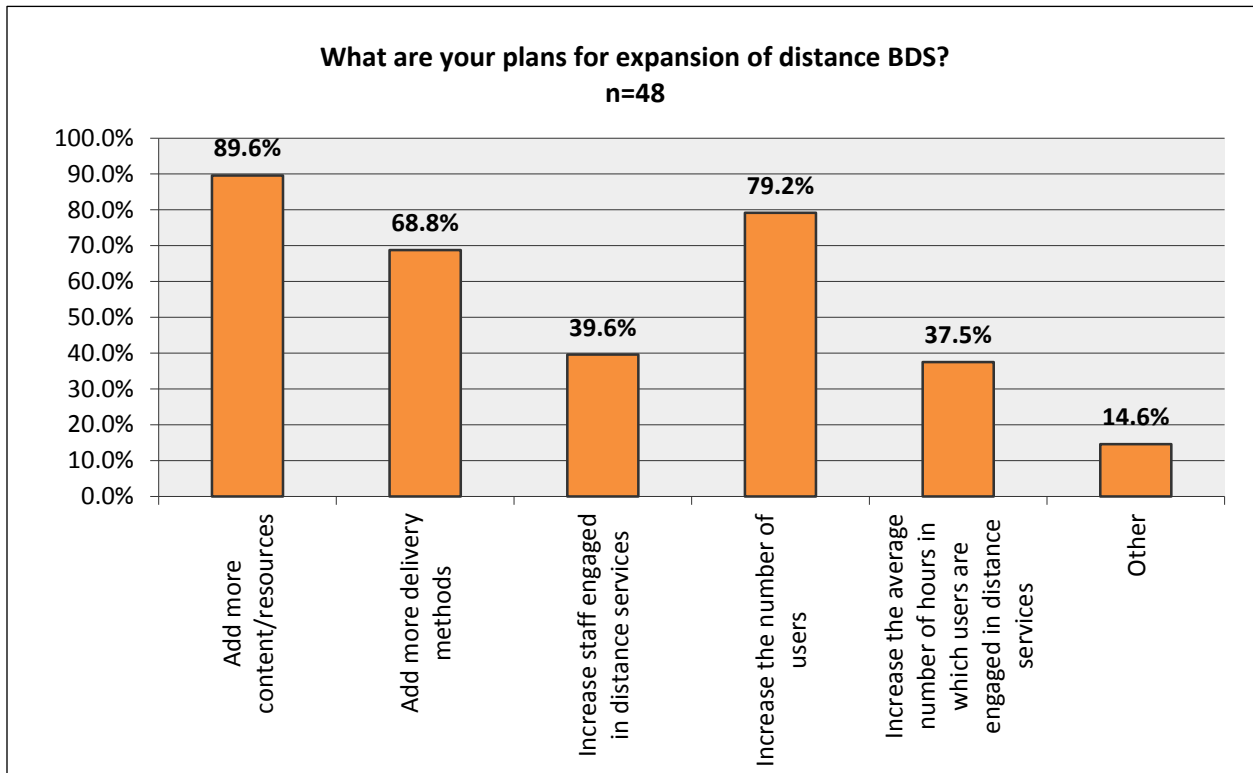**(check all that apply)**
n=69
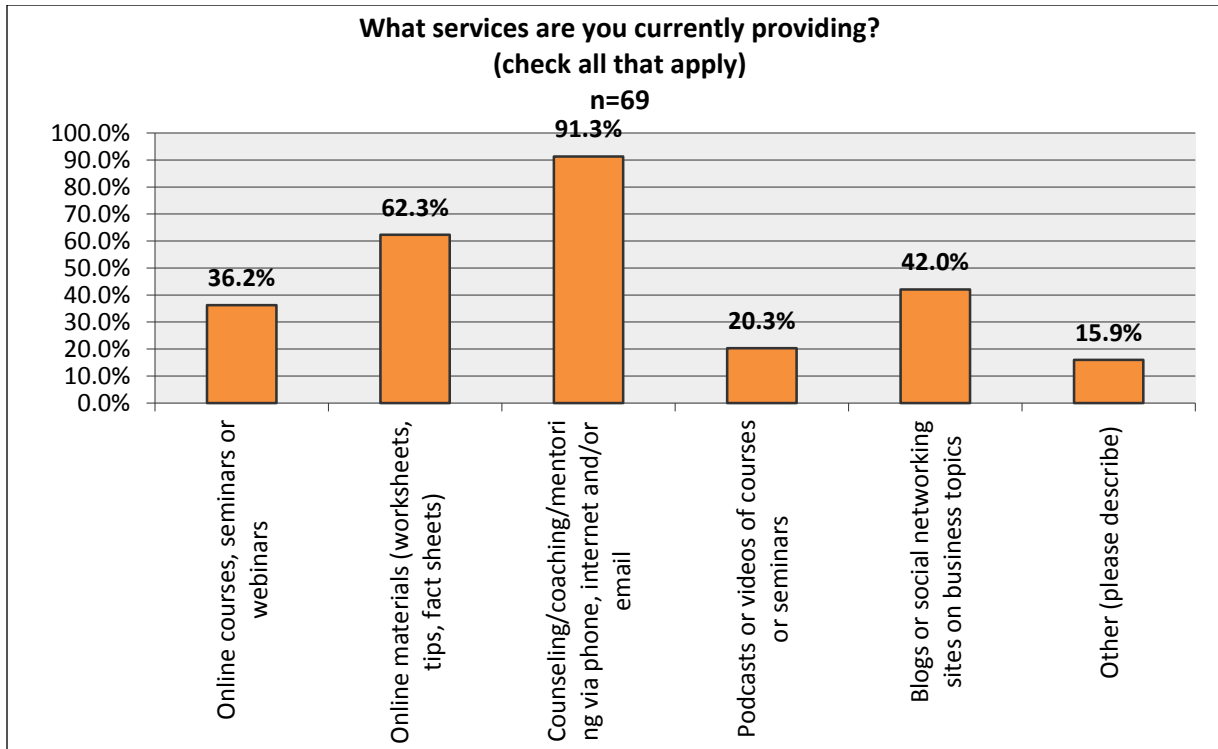
*Other responses included industry specific seminars, interactive forums utilizing WebEx, educational DVD series.

Roughly sixty percent of practitioners responding to FIELD's survey noted that they have been engaged in this area for three years or less. Not surprisingly given this short period of time, roughly 65 percent noted serving 100 or fewer clients through distance-based activities. The newness of the activities implies that there is much experimentation occurring and, therefore, opportunities for shared learning in this area.

Approximately half of respondents (55 percent) use distance business development services primarily to supplement or extend offerings to clients who also receive in-person services. Programs noted trying to keep pace with busy entrepreneurs by offering aspects of their content online (to access at their own pace and convenience) or through webinars, while at the same time affording a degree of flexibility to the organization. However, a small sub-set of organizations (17 percent) has launched distance services to broaden their organizations' audiences, drawing in clientele who do not or cannot use in-person services. Several organizations cited using these services as a way to help new clients better prepare for their initial face-to-face meeting. And finally, 21percent of organizations cited that they used distance services to provide value-added services, such as access to specialized expertise (e.g., consultants in certain subject areas) that was not available on staff or on-site, but that could be made available through webinar or other online formats.
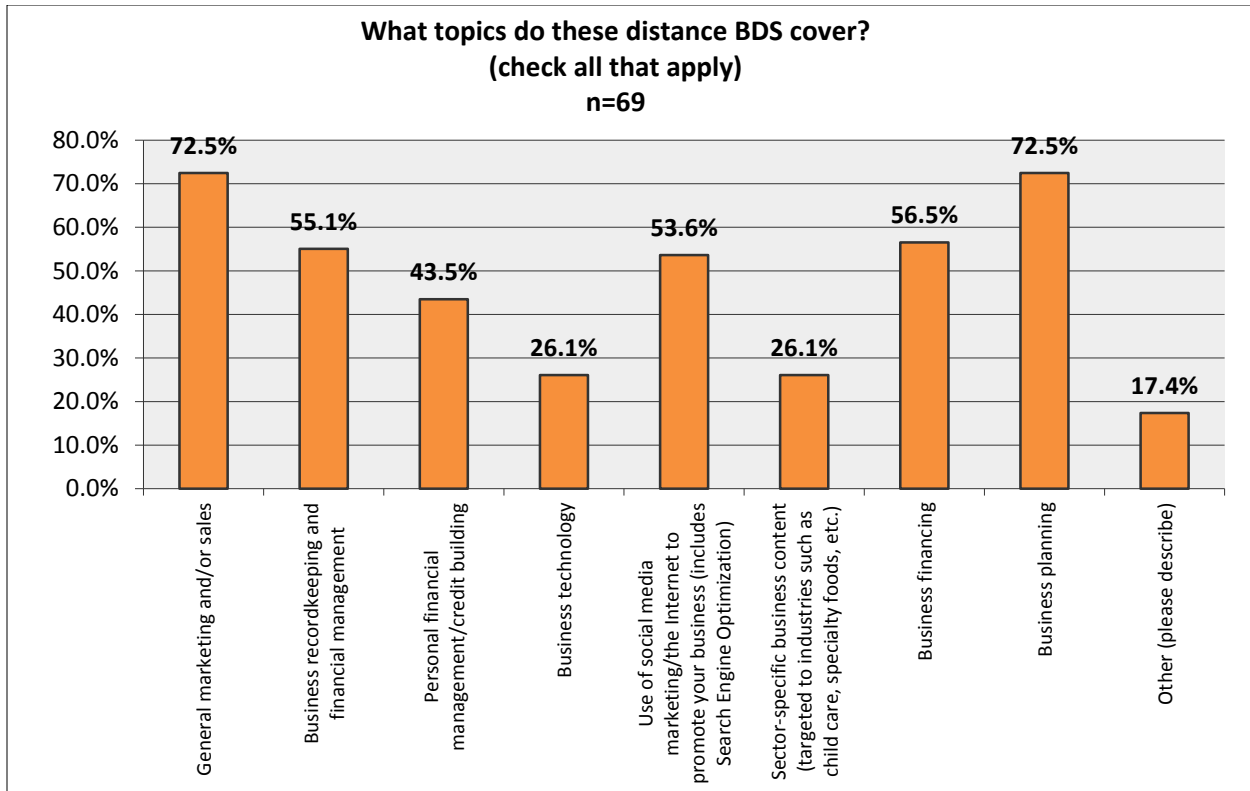
FIELD's survey also found that the majority of respondent organizations create their own distance-based content — 82 percent report doing so. The survey responses also illustrate the growth potential in this area — 73 percent of respondents noted that they would be growing these services; either by adding more content (90 percent), by increasing the number of users that

participate in their distance BDS services (79 percent) or employing additional delivery methods (69 percent).

What are your plans for expansion of distance BDS?
n=48

Category	Percent
Add more content/resources	89.6%
Add more delivery methods	68.8%
Increase staff engaged in distance services	39.6%
Increase the number of users	79.2%
Increase the average number of hours in which users are engaged in distance services	37.5%
Other	14.6%

Content Delivery and Program Innovation

The content of distance BDS being delivered mirrors the spectrum of what is being delivered offline, but adjusted, abbreviated or enhanced to make it more accessible in online or distance medium. Over 70 percent of respondents noted that they provided business-planning services, and a similar percentage noted providing content on general marketing and sales in their distance offerings. Around 55 percent of respondents noted that they provide assistance on business recordkeeping and financial management, and a similar percentage provided content related to business financing. Almost 54 percent reported offering content on how to use social media and the Internet to promote one's business.

What topics do these distance BDS cover?
(check all that apply)
n=69

General marketing and/or sales: 72.5%
Business recordkeeping and financial management: 55.1%
Personal financial management/credit building: 43.5%
Business technology: 26.1%
Use of social media marketing/the Internet to promote your business (includes Search Engine Optimization): 53.6%
Sector-specific business content (targeted to industries such as child care, specialty foods, etc.): 26.1%
Business financing: 56.5%
Business planning: 72.5%
Other (please describe): 17.4%

*Other include time management, how to green your business, contracting/certification.

A majority of programs collaborate in offering their distance business development services.
Fifty-one percent of respondents noted they partner in delivering their BDS services. These partnerships include Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs), other nonprofit partners and corporations providing their expertise on a wide variety of topics, and colleges and universities that are lending their knowledge in curriculum design and technology to their partner MDOs. For instance, ACEnet, an MDO located in Athens, Ohio, has furthered its BDS work with the local food and agricultural sectors by working collaboratively on additional websites that offer content or networking opportunities. One of those sites, Ohio Foodshed is a project with Rural Action Sustainable Agriculture that offers a one-stop source for information about local food in Appalachian Ohio.

The experience of the Scale Academy members and several of the survey respondents suggests that the ***effective development of content depends on a number of factors, such as*** the organizational goal of the program in this area (i.e. Is it supplementing and providing flexibility for clients the organization is currently serving, or bringing down costs? Or both?); the profile of the clients being reached (in terms of their comfort with varying technologies and formats); and whether and how the curriculum evolves based on user feedback.

Factors Influencing Effective Content Development

Define program goal

Understand target market

Incorporate feedback

Rural Innovators: 'necessity is the mother of invention.' Some of the most interesting experimentation with distance strategies is occurring at rural microenterprise organizations that are seeking ways to cover large or sparsely-populated geographies efficiently. ACEnet has engaged in distance BDS work as a way of scaling its reach and impact among Southern Ohio's growing food sector. ACEnet's early goal was to focus on the food sector, and, specifically to assist food entrepreneurs to increase their market readiness. As its work in this area evolved, distance learning became an efficient way to attract new clients and introduce them to ACEnet's services, and to provide up-front services less intensively, reserving one-on-one technical assistance until clients require more customized assistance. Currently, ACEnet is strengthening its pre-training resources-- including social media tools such as blog posts and Facebook – that allow it to market and communicate basic content, or offer a 'hook' to come to its main site, www.acenetworks.org. The organization has found that short topical overviews teamed with checklists, as well as posted PowerPoint presentations designed specifically for the sector, provide a good initial grounding and introduction to its training topics. ACEnet currently is incorporating short video clips in response to user feedback and has recruited visual arts students from a local university to assist in this process.   Although its online posting of webinars, and other basic business content, primarily allows the organization to reach and prepare new clients, ACEnet has found that these services also provide additional offerings for their longer-term customers.

Located in rural Maine, Coastal Enterprises' (CEI), service area includes communities as much as a four-hour drive away from its main office. It has worked over the last six to seven years to incorporate distance BDS services, primarily to draw in new clients – making it an early adopter among the MDOs interviewed for this research. Reviewing user feedback, CEI's approach has

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evolved to focus on two forms of online workshops. In one, a client can interact with instructors, and other participants, in a virtual conference room using voice-over-internet or text messaging chat. The other approach offers self-paced instruction in which a client can access content (including links to a live session recording) within a specified time period. CEI also found that it needed to find ways to nurture existing client relationships (even after a face-to-face session) — as distance remained a major hurdle. As such, using phone and email to counsel and coach clients it engages with initially in person is commonplace for the organization. Some clients are never seen in person, due to distance, and are engaged with only via phone, e-mail, and/or web conferencing.

Other organizations have added distance BDS after receiving feedback from clients and participants. Seeking to establish a larger service area in rural Wisconsin without a bricks and mortar presence, the Wisconsin Women's Business Initiative Corporation (WWBIC) has embarked on two primary approaches that blend online and offline work. The first approach uses telephone/email counseling to follow up after a client has taken its initial business-planning course on-site. In the second, the organization offers a series of webinars, led either by staff or (depending on the content) by partners, which allow access to a wider diversity of trainers (e.g. local Department of Commerce). Realizing that its standard in-person curriculum would need to be adapted to work well in other mediums, WWBIC works with a local university to abbreviate and convert key parts of its content to webinar-friendly formats. In addition, the organization has also experimented with using Skype videoconferences to conduct virtual site visits with some of its loan applicants.

Who is best served with distance BDS?

FIELD's 2003 Best Practice Guide *Business First: Using Technology to Advance Microenterprise Development* outlines a schematic of the profile of learning types best suited to distance learning, and the schematic continues to resonate today.   Since the guide was written, technology has rapidly evolved over the last decade and the pool of people who are seemingly better suited to these technologies has grown. Now there is a generation who grew up with these technologies and who are starting to enter the age group where entrepreneurship is more common.

Box 21: On-line vs. In-person Training	
On-line learning is best for	**In-person learning is best for**
▪ remote or home bound/business clients	▪ learners who want to escape isolation
▪ clients who need to complete training at odd hours	▪ people who are motivated by interpersonal and group interaction
▪ people who have already settled on one business idea	▪ brainstorming and visioning; sorting through multiple business ideas
▪ straightforward business development training with tangible outcomes	▪ empowerment, case management, life skills training, personal counseling, interpersonal dynamics or sales presentation training
▪ delivering modular content	
▪ learners who feel comfortable using written communication and reading comprehension skills	▪ learners who present literacy, technology or language barriers
Combining on-line and in-person training delivery can accommodate some features of both approaches.	

Business First: Using Technology to Advance Microenterprise Development. [3]

Moreover, with the introduction of smart-phones and the explosion of a multitude of user-friendly formats (such as video and social media platforms), and rapid changes in the way people consume content, the universe of online learners is likely to continue to grow and expand. Whereas the first wave of distance learning focused on one-way delivery of self-paced content,[4] social media platforms are now providing tools that can encourage and enable collaboration, discussion and learning from others. Although traditional distance learning is not for everyone, the introduction and growing consumption and use of social media, especially across different age groups, creates more opportunities to ***engage new clients and supplement in-person business content*** using these differing methods. ***Forty-two percent of the organizations that responded to FIELD's distance learning survey are now using social media as part of their distance BDS offerings.***

ACCION San Diego's use of social media channels exemplifies this trend. The organization's core business is microlending; however, over the past several years it has created a strategy to provide abbreviated business content to its large client base via several avenues: an e-newsletter and blog, webinars (usually done in partnership with other organizations), and engaging with clients on Twitter and Facebook. ACCION San Diego has seen a steady and growing level of client engagement/activity on its social media channels — followers post responses to articles

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[3] Karen D. Grossman and Erika Malm, *Business First: Using Technology to Advance Microenterprise Development* (Washington D.C.: The Aspen Institute, 2003), 43.

[4] Harvey Singh, "Building Effective Blended Learning Programs," *Educational Technology*, Volume 43, Number 6 (November – December 2003): 51-54.

and analysis, or to questions posed to inspire dialogue (e.g., tell us about your marketing strategy). Business owners also use these venues to network with each other online.

What have organizations learned from long-term engagement with distance BDS?

Although the majority of surveyed organizations have offered distance BDS for less than three years, a few organizations have a longer history of work in this area. Interviews and peer learning activities with these organizations have revealed a number of lessons about how to build distance BDS programs that are effective in drawing in and serving clients.

Take a user-centric approach
MicroMentor has a unique BDS objective — to use a technology platform to match mentors and mentees, and facilitate and monitor the quality of the interaction between them. It seeks to maintain a platform that is scalable and can operate on a national basis. While unique in its goals (clearly not all microenterprise organizations look to develop platforms of this sort, nor do many others focus primarily on mentoring), MicroMentor's longer-term engagement in distance BDS provides unique insights, especially from a design perspective.

MicroMentor launched its services in 2002, went through a variety of upgrades and adjustments, and then completed a wholesale redesign of the site in 2010. The newest version of the site incorporated substantial user feedback into its design, and created a way to capture customer feedback on an ongoing basis to inform appropriate adjustments or additions to its products, services and process. ***MicroMentor found that to develop the appropriate platform for the delivery of services, an organization must always keep the user at the forefront of the design process.***

Design and User Feedback Changes to Distance-Based BDS (MicroMentor)		
	MM1.0	**MM2.0**
Services	• One-on-one Mentoring	• One-on-one Mentoring • Searchable Question and Answer Section • Peer Networking through group functionality • Resource Center providing guidance on mentoring relationships
Participants	• Participants were either mentors or mentees • Mentees were only represented by their Mentoring Request	• Participants can be both a mentor and a mentee • Mentees have an Entrepreneur Profile that describes their business
Mentoring Process	• Entrepreneurs have one Mentoring Request • Mentoring Requests lacked specificity, lumping all needs of the business into one category	• Entrepreneurs can have many Mentoring Requests • Mentoring Requests are issue driven, better reflecting the evolving needs of most businesses

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	• Mentoring Requests stay in the system permanently • Participant searches on their own behalf according to a fairly rigid engine • Either party could initiate a Mentoring Relationship which left a lot of ambiguity around who needed to contact whom to begin the relationship • No guidance at the beginning of a Mentoring Relationship	• Mentoring Requests stay pending for three months or until the entrepreneur is matched • Participant can conduct a more dynamic search • Search engine automatically sends requests for help to relevant volunteers • Ability to refer a request to a friend – inside or outside the MM network • There is a specific order in which Mentoring Relationships are formed • Templates are provided at each step of the way helping entrepreneurs and mentors communicate at the beginning of the Mentoring Relationship
Service and Support	• No online help available • Limited ability for participants to provide feedback	• Help Center answering Frequently Asked Questions • Regular surveys automatically sent out at key moments in the Mentoring Relationship • Process improvements allowing MicroMentor to interact with participants at key moments • Annual Business Outcomes Survey • Feedback button on each page of the MicroMentor website

In creating the latest iteration of the MicroMentor site, management enlisted a consultant to help outline all of the requirements of MicroMentor 2.0 and develop an effective template for testing the usability of the site. Usability refers to how well users can learn to use a product to achieve their goals and how satisfied they are with that process. From a business perspective, organizations can lower operating and development costs by developing a product, such as a website, correctly the first time by soliciting user feedback before the site is launched. Integrating usability tests reflects the principle that if users do not find a website helpful, they will not use it. Based on the user feedback, MicroMentor adjusted its platform to allow users to self-navigate more easily and organized the site around helping the client to clearly define a business problem to be solved through the mentorship match. The organization also institutionalized a process for developing its platform that involves five key steps: (1) make current content easily accessible; (2) experiment with new pieces of content; (3) solicit feedback from users; (4) evaluate whether it works; and (5) make adjustments as necessary.

This process is reflected in MicroMentor's work to improve the process of matching mentees and mentors. By interviewing users of the site, MicroMentor found that the initial match was proving difficult for some because some potential mentees did not know how to approach a mentor and were intimidated by the process. In response, MicroMentor created email templates to ease the introduction process. It also provided content that helped mentees define their business problem or challenge more clearly, to bolster chances of starting a productive relationship. Staff describes their approach as iterative — they make a few changes, gauge feedback and make yet another set

of changes to continue to improve the process. As MicroMentor developed content and messaging, it also enlisted a group of volunteer mentors to gain insight into how to improve the matching process given their experiences. Finally, MicroMentor also made sure to instill a number of customer support touch points — so that every action taken on the site is now acted upon with an email or call.

MicroMentor has distilled these learnings over time from its efforts to improve its platform. The organization strives to keep its users at the forefront when designing a product or introducing new approaches or pieces of content, and now has incorporated new ways of doing so.

Lower costs facilitate greater experimentation, but ongoing investment is still required.
The cost of setting up and maintaining distance learning technologies for BDS services has come down significantly in recent years. Off-the-shelf webinar or virtual conference technologies such as ReadyTalk, GoToMeeting or Adobe Connect, have become commonplace and helped lower the costs of experimenting with different tools. And, of course, free social media tools, like Facebook or Twitter, have added to an organization's ability to experiment with delivering content in new ways without significant out-of-pocket expenses (of course, there are still staff costs in researching and implementing these technologies, and those too must be factored into the calculus of offering these services).

Greater accessibility has also helped organizations avoid getting 'locked-in' to a particular technology --something not easily sustained by a typical nonprofit microenterprise organization. WESST, for example began using a platform — Clip-Share — to quickly post content and use it as a pilot, but the software had limited capacities for data collection, making it problematic for long-term development. As a result, WESST began upgrading its own website for enhanced audio and video capabilities to support its planned distance learning work.[5] Organizations like CEI have also taken advantage of more reasonable pricing levels to tinker with several types of virtual learning technologies (Elluminate and Moodle[6]) that it believes are better suited to rural communities, where dial-up access is still very prevalent and imposes some constraints.

Although lower costs are a benefit in terms of supporting experimentation, one lesson from early experience with distance learning has not changed: organizations that view distance BDS as a core strategy to enhance current offerings do not view this as a one-time investment in the purchase of a given technology. Rather, a yearly budget line-item is necessary in order to support ongoing investments that must be made to make product and service enhancements, and to continue to engage users over time.

The maxim "if you build it, they won't necessarily come" resonates among organizations that have remained engaged in distance BDS work over time. ***Marketing resources (dedicated staffing with those skills and particular strategies employed) are still key to maintaining traffic and use among users.*** Even with the many design and content changes that MicroMentor

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[5] Elaine L. Edgcomb and Tamra Thetford. *Focused on Growth: Scaling Business Development Services in the United States*. (Washington D.C.: The Aspen Institute, 2010), 23.
[6] Moodle is a Course Management System (CMS) also known as a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The system is a platform to conduct online courses or augment face-to-face courses. Similarly, Elluminate, owned by Blackboard, is a web conferencing program that has virtual rooms that hold classes and meetings.

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implemented as part of its site overhaul, the organization also recognized the need to dedicate marketing and public relations resources to raising awareness via social media channels, online and print magazines, in order to maintain interest among current clients and initiate new client connections.

Marketing has similarly proven to be relevant for organizations looking to serve primarily their existing clientele with distance services -- such as ACCION San Diego. The organization currently enlists a part-time marketing and resource coordinator to maintain and create content, and to make sure that social media channels are kept active with ongoing dialogue. As in many other organizations, this part-time position is supplemented with unpaid interns and volunteers.

As noted above, ACEnet largely uses its distance BDS services as a way to leverage a small staff, yet as its two online communities (see above discussion) have grown, the organization has dedicated a significant amount of creative effort to piece together the expertise it sees as necessary to keep the communities active and adding new content. ACEnet is using university students in the visual arts to assist in creating and cataloguing video content for its food sector curriculum. In sum, organizations have found that ***committing both a baseline and modest ongoing financial investment saves money and provides better client service in the long run.***
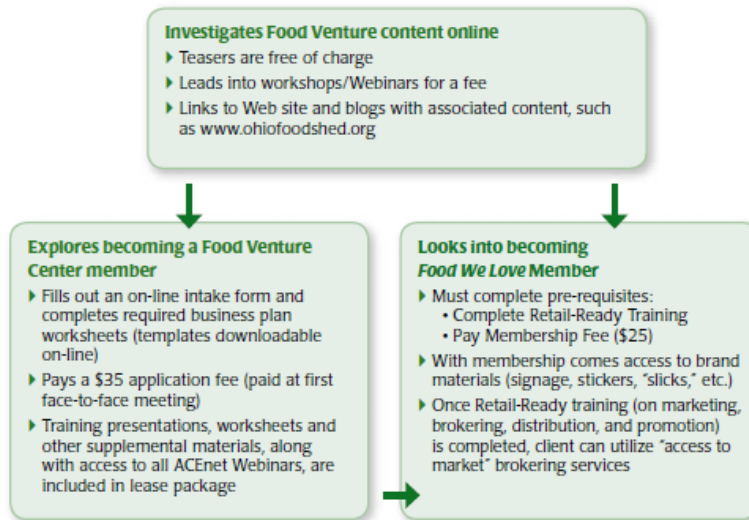
Leverage skilled staff
Although new technology has assisted some organizations in maximizing a small staff, not all staff members are equally good at implementing and using technology. CEI has trained its counseling staff to work remotely with clients using an array of different tools, such as Elluminate, Moodle and Adobe Connect (virtual classrooms); however, it has found that not all trainers are well-suited to interacting online. Some staff is simply more effective in-person, others are better at virtual counseling (phone/email), and still others are highly efficient in presenting in webinars or in an online classroom format. MicroMentor staff further echoed this comment. In the organization's experience, finding a staff person who is passionate about distance strategies is key not only to implementation, but to the evolution of tools over time. ***As programs look to grow their distance BDS programming, they must identify staff who are dedicated to and skilled in using, experimenting with and championing different distance-based training methods.***

Mix on and off-line interactions
Online and offline training play a synergistic role in many organizations. As shown below, much of ACEnet's initial online content is aimed at preparing entrepreneurs for membership in its Food Venture incubator program and/or access-to-markets programming, portions of which require in-person interactions with the organization.

Figure 4: Typical Pathways of Food Services Clients

Investigates Food Venture content online
▸ Teasers are free of charge
▸ Leads into workshops/Webinars for a fee
▸ Links to Web site and blogs with associated content, such as www.ohiofoodshed.org

Explores becoming a Food Venture Center member
▸ Fills out an on-line intake form and completes required business plan worksheets (templates downloadable on-line)
▸ Pays a $35 application fee (paid at first face-to-face meeting)
▸ Training presentations, worksheets and other supplemental materials, along with access to all ACEnet Webinars, are included in lease package

Looks into becoming Food We Love Member
▸ Must complete pre-requisites:
  • Complete Retail-Ready Training
  • Pay Membership Fee ($25)
▸ With membership comes access to brand materials (signage, stickers, "slicks," etc.)
▸ Once Retail-Ready training (on marketing, brokering, distribution, and promotion) is completed, client can utilize "access to market" brokering services

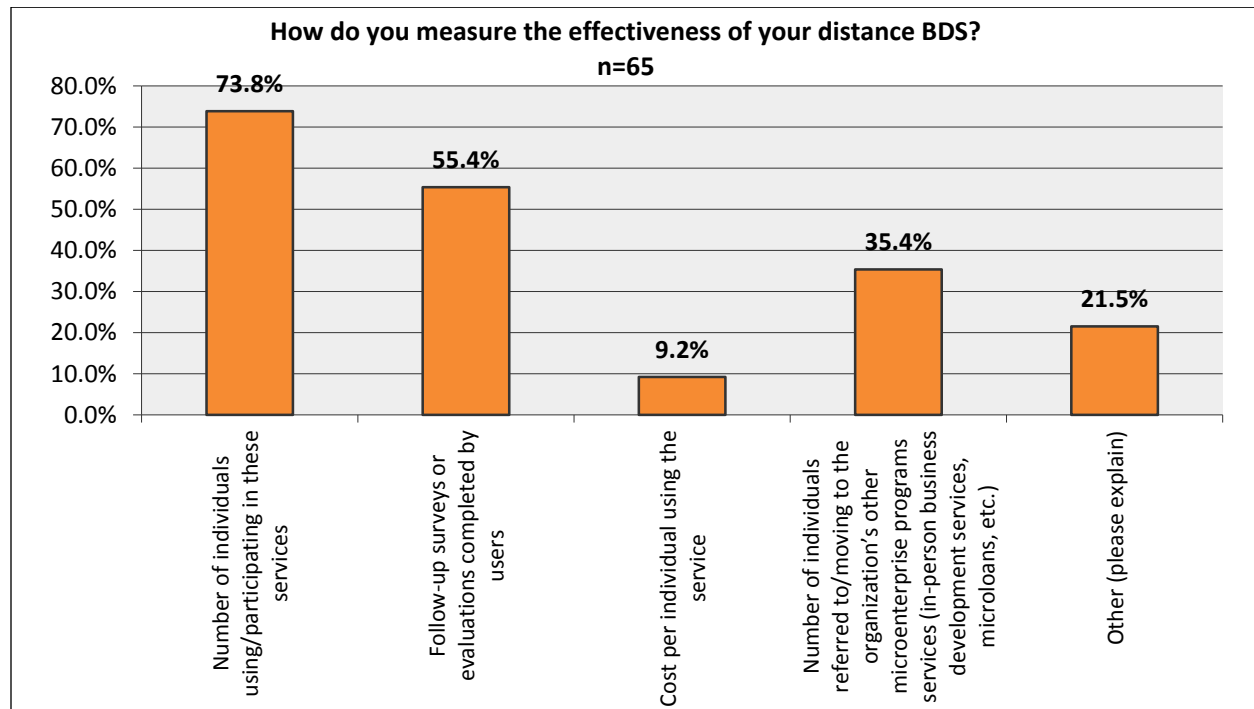*Focused on Growth: Scaling Business Development Services in the U.S.*[7]

MicroMentor is also looking to strengthen local connections to build upon its online interactions. The organization is experimenting with hosting offline events that bring together entrepreneurs and mentors to gain critical mass in certain geographic areas. The purposes of these events are to generate some media interest by telling the MicroMentor story, spread the word locally and strengthen nascent relationships with local affiliate organizations. The affiliate program serves as a platform for local microenterprise programs that want to leverage the MicroMentor database of mentors to connect with their clients. It also seeks to add value to mentees and mentors who gain the opportunity to also meet face-to-face.

Effectiveness and Measurement of Distance BDS

Just as the majority of surveyed organizations indicated that their distance BDS are relatively young, so are their efforts to measure the effectiveness of these services. The experience of organizations that have engaged in distance BDS for some time suggests that ***evolving services to better meet client needs and generating a return on investment for distance-based work requires establishing key metrics that reflect the organization's goals.***   The survey indicated that the measures used to assess effectiveness fall into several categories — the number of people accessing the materials (typically measured using web analytics like downloads or site visits); customer feedback; cost; and graduation into other programming at the organization. Roughly half of the organizations use a combination of these factors to measure their performance.

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[7] Elaine L. Edgcomb and Tamra Thetford. *Focused on Growth: Scaling Business Development Services in the United States*. (Washington D.C.: The Aspen Institute, 2010), 22.

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For example, some organizations look at increases in the number of people accessing materials as one marker of effectiveness of programming, but also examine the number of new users that graduate into other services. Moreover, if the goal of the distance BDS is to strengthen relationships with existing clients, a program might look at indicators of usage (e.g., participation in webinars), in combination with client surveys, to gauge how current relationships are being supplemented. Twelve percent of respondents noted they had not yet established a way to measure this programming.

How do you measure the effectiveness of your distance BDS?
n=65

Category	Percentage
Number of individuals using/participating in these services	73.8%
Follow-up surveys or evaluations completed by users	55.4%
Cost per individual using the service	9.2%
Number of individuals referred to/moving to the organization's other microenterprise programs services (in-person business development services, microloans, etc.)	35.4%
Other (please explain)	21.5%

*Other included comparing benchmarks long distance versus in person, use of ongoing scoring tool, etc.

ACEnet and MicroMentor use web analytics to determine how active or popular certain pieces of content are, and where users fall off in their navigation of the site. MicroMentor places a high value on customer feedback and has put a feedback button on each page of their site. Given the high number of users on its site, analyzing and acting upon the amount of data generated by this mechanism has been a challenge. The organization plans to bring on a "customer service officer" — a dedicated resource that would elevate top-level concerns to management and provide capacity for more rapid and in-depth reaction to customer issues. Moreover, like other organizations, MicroMentor has also incorporated questions around user experience in its client surveys to gauge how well products or services are meeting customer needs.

Social media strategies can be measured by examining the level of activity on the channels, (e.g., Facebook Insights), and whether users are sharing content and participating in timely dialogue. Even more important is determining whether the social media tools are meeting the overall goals

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set by the organization. For instance, as noted above, ACCION San Diego's goal was to supplement its existing loan offerings and engage current clients in dialogue by providing useful business content. To measure progress against those goals, the organization tracks "open" rate for its e-newsletters (which has been high), the extent to which social media activity has led to participation in trainings/workshops on more focused topics, and the level of comments and dialogue on its Facebook page and blog. In sum, the organization has identified tangible benefits as it has set up ways of measuring its progress. Interestingly, the content developed online has assisted some of ACCION San Diego's offline activities as well. The organization does quarterly call nights to all current clients, and the business tips and content developed for its online offerings allow staff to assist clients and kick-start conversations in a variety of areas.

Conclusion

Many microenterprise organizations are quickly incorporating distance-based work into their delivery of business development services in response to changing demands from clients in terms of how they want to consume business content. The findings and lessons from this scan indicate that MDOs are using these services to facilitate growth in the number of clients served, especially as programs move and expand to serve larger geographies. The scan also illuminates the finding that distance services can help to create efficiencies and strengthen the capacity of organizations to nurture client relationships. As organizations evolve their work in this area, a closer eye to measurement will not only allow programs to assess the return on investment of their distance BDS, but will also support ongoing improvement in this fast evolving area of practice.

Resources:

Beth's Blog: *How Networked Nonprofits Are Using Social Media to Power Change*
Offers several posts on return on investment and tools for measurement, along with a wealth of information on social media and nonprofits.

The Bridgespan Group: "Getting Social Media Right: a Short Guide for Nonprofit Organizations"

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