

Ann Arbor News

It's not all about tech businesses

Mary McDonough

Sunday, September 16, 2007

One of the most interesting moments at last week's Impact event sponsored by the Ann Arbor Area Chamber of Commerce came when Sharon McRill, owner of The Betty Brigade, posed this question for speaker Mike Finney, CEO of Ann Arbor Spark, the area's economic development agency:

What does Spark do for service-oriented, non-tech businesses?

Finney seized the opportunity to give The Betty Brigade, a concierge service, a plug in front of the crowd by telling a personal story about having called them to see if they provide transportation. (They don't.) "We have to be advocates for those cool little companies that may not be tech businesses but are innovative," he said.

Finney later explained by phone that Spark works with all types of businesses and wouldn't turn anyone seeking help away. But he conceded, "We tend to stay away from those that I would call lifestyle-type business, those like the local barbershop." Businesses with the desire to grow beyond a sole proprietorship are the ones Spark is targeting.

"My frustration is I'm always hearing about high-tech, high-tech, but I'm not sure I should be," said McRill, a regular fixture at chamber of commerce events. During a break at the Impact event, several small business owners approached her expressing similar frustration and thanked her for standing up and asking the question.

The Betty Brigade specializes in organizing, event planning, pet care and errands, and is growing. After five years in business, McRill is about to hire her sixth employee - a sales and marketing director - and plans to open a second office in West Bloomfield within the next six months. She wants to expand across the state eventually.

The Betty Brigade represents a part of the local economy that is growing.

Private service-providing employment is projected to grow more than 2 percent by 2009, according to University of Michigan economists George Fulton and Don Grimes.

Wednesday's forum, an annual gathering of business leaders to discuss issues of importance to the local economy, also featured Doug Rothwell, CEO of Detroit Renaissance and state Rep. Pam Byrnes, D-Lyndon Township. Naturally, questions from the audience touched on the state's budget debacle and what, if anything, the state can do to keep more companies like Volkswagen and Pfizer from leaving.

Said Finney: "Talent is the most important thing. There is no higher priority in this state than supporting higher education," he said. "Incentives are an afterthought."

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