

## SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

# Small-business owners learn how to do better

Free federal program teaches strategies of sales, finance and more.

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George Koulouris knew more than a little about running a restaurant when he enrolled in a Small Business Administration-sponsored education course called Street-Wise Steps to Small Business Growth.

He'd grown up in his father's business, the Grecian Gyro, and oversaw its growth from a single outpost in Hapeville to what is now a four-store operation with about 40 employees and franchising plans.

"The restaurants were successful and sales were good," Koulouris recalled of when he started the class in April 2011. But by that November, after 13 biweekly classes, he realized just how much he didn't know and, moreover, what he needed to do to turn a good business into a better one.

It's a familiar reaction among business owners in Atlanta and the 26 other cities who have participated in the nationwide program. The course curriculum, developed by a Boston-based nonprofit, Interise, which has a contract

with the SBA, covers topics including business development strategies, strategic planning, financial management, marketing and sales, human resources, capital access and government contracts.

The free program is offered once a year to about 15 companies that must apply for acceptance by the SBA.

And what does Koulouris say he learned? Volumes.

"I learned how to set realistic measurable goals for the

company and how to develop and implement a plan to achieve those goals," he said. "I learned how to better manage our finances and how to increase cash flow and profitability. I learned better staff management strategies and how to best inspire our team. And I learned about opportunities to raise capital for the expansion of both the company and franchise stores."

Others take away something else.

Chris Spears, vice president of Arke, a marketing technology strategy and consulting firm, said his company learned about the government

contracting process and how to build relationships with of-

ficials.

Ines Kuhn, co-owner of UnitOne, a marketing solutions firm, said, "The course gives you a good overview over all the aspects needed to run a successful business, spanning from marketing to finance to sales and more."

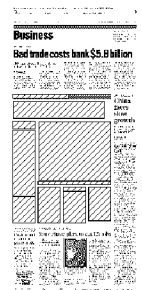
The program focuses not on startup companies, but on those that have been around for a few years or longer, operate in any kind of industry and seek ways to flourish.

Jean Horstman, CEO of Interise, said the program is "focused on providing small em-

ployers with the resources they need to grow." It particularly focuses on helping historically disadvantaged business owners, including women and minorities.

Most participants have \$500,000 to \$7 million in revenue but "have hit a plateau and can't seem to push past it," said Russ Young, an Atlanta business coach and program instructor.

Koulouris, for one, said he has pushed past it, as sales and profits both jumped after he started the course. "We saw improvements almost immediately," he said.





**George Koulouris (second from left), owner of the Grecian Gyro chain of fast-food Greek restaurants, works with Chris Dolgetta (left), owner of the company's first franchise in Johns Creek. PHIL SKINNER / PSKINNER@AJC.COM**