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## Small business owners go back to school

By JOYCE M. ROSENBERG

### NEW YORK

As the fall semester begins at colleges and universities across the country, thousands of small business owners will be among the students. Many people who run their own companies realize they need to learn more about finance, marketing and managing, and so they decide to squeeze courses into their already tight schedules.

Peter Figueredo, CEO of NETexponent, a New York-based advertising agency, had run the company for three years when he realized he needed to learn more about operating a business.

"I know the actual type of advertising and marketing we do extremely well," Figueredo said. But "how to manage people, set up an infrastructure, finances, human resources was still something very new to me."

So in 2004, he began a three-year program on entrepreneurship at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Besides classroom learning that led to his being granted a certificate from MIT, he came away with a network of other small business owners who he still turns to when he needs help or advice.

Michael Cramer had taken plenty of undergraduate and graduate business courses, but realized after he'd founded Adagio Teas that he didn't know enough about public relations. And he knew that "the best way to get people to get to know you is through media stories. I was never exposed to that side of the equation."

So Cramer, whose company is based in Clifton, N.J., took a course at nearby Montclair State University. All of Adagio's public relations is now done in-house, and the company has gotten itself mentioned in a number of very high-profile newspapers, magazines and Web sites.

Colleges and universities around the country -- junior colleges as well as the big-name schools -- are an ever-growing resource for company owners looking to further their business education. And with many schools catering to small business owners, there is a huge range of individual courses as well as certificate and degree programs available. And many schools offer flexible-attendance programs and online learning.

Searching online is probably the best way to find classes and programs, although asking other business owners who have gone back to school is also a good idea, since they can tell you about their experiences.

If cost is an issue, you might want to look into courses offered at U.S. Small Business Administration-sponsored Small Business Development Centers. Many of these centers, which offer advice to small business owners and also have periodic classes, are located on college campuses. You can find a list online at <http://www.sba.gov/aboutsba/sbaprograms/sbdc/sbdclocator/index.html>. Some of the courses are free, while others are quite low-cost -- although keep in mind that your tuition, no matter where you go to learn, is most likely deductible when it

comes time to compile your income tax return.

There are also non-traditional ways of learning. Finding a mentor who's willing to help you learn as you run your company might also fill your needs. Figueredo counts his former MIT classmates among the advisers he still learns from.

Your local chamber of commerce might be able to help you find a mentor, or a trade association. And don't forget about SCORE, the SBA-sponsored organization of retired executives who give free advice, in person or online, to small businesses. You can find a SCORE adviser through its Web site, <http://www.score.org>.

Some business owners need to go back to school not to learn a new skill or subject, but to keep up with changes, often in technology.

Brenda Sullivan, owner of BLS Communications, a San Diego-based public relations business, is in the midst of obtaining a certificate in digital design. She's been doing design for years, and handled some projects for her clients, but "the last couple of years, the technology has just grown by leaps and bounds. ... I have started to feel like the technology was getting away from me."

It will take a year and a half to complete the certificate at the University of California, San Diego, but already, Sullivan said, "when I work with graphic designers, I feel so much more confident."

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