

ONTARIO SMALL BUSINESSES GET A NEW RIDE ON THE DIGITAL MAIN STREET

Posted on June 24, 2020

Categories: [Insights](#), [Publications](#)

On June 11, 2020, the Ontario government, in partnership with the federal government, announced a \$57 million investment into the province's Digital Main Street platform. The scaled-up program will assist over 22,900 small Ontario businesses to "go digital" as they adapt to the virtual realities of the COVID-19 world and beyond. If you are a small business or an entrepreneur, you may be eligible to take advantage of these expanded programs to strengthen the ability of your business to recover, grow and compete in today's transformed digital economy.

What is Digital Main Street?

Digital Main Street was created in 2016 by the City of Toronto and the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas ("**TABIA**") to provide consulting and support services to main street businesses. It uses online learning and training programs to help small businesses embrace and manage new technology to transform their businesses – essentially, it acts as a digital "how to" guide to help small businesses grow. One-on-one support is provided by the Digital Service Squad, a team of students and recent graduates with specialized technology and digital marketing skills. An additional 1,400 positions will be created across Ontario for students and recent graduates on the Digital Service Squad as a result of the new funding announced by the Ontario and federal governments.

Expanded Programs and Support for Small Businesses

The \$57 million investment will be distributed under three new Digital Main Street platforms:

1. **shopHERE powered by Google:** Pre-pandemic, consumers were already abandoning traditional bricks-and-mortar companies and moving towards e-commerce platforms. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has materially accelerated that trend which prompted the Ontario government to act. Digital Main Street, in collaboration with Google, Shopify, Mastercard and Microsoft, will offer small businesses and entrepreneurs the opportunity to build, improve and launch an online presence with a short turnaround time. The Digital Service Squad will provide hands-on assistance and training to support the store launch, including working with a small business owner to create a customized online storefront

and launch tools to get your site off of the ground.

2. **Digital Main Street Grant:** A future feature of the Digital Main Street platform is the “Digital Transformation Grant Program” which will provide small businesses with opportunities to obtain grants of up to \$2,500 to help fund their transition to an e-commerce model. In addition, a business will be eligible to receive guidance and training on how to maximize such digital transformations, including support in performing digital marketing. While this grant program has not yet launched, businesses can sign-up now to receive information on the program as soon as it launches.
3. **Future-Proofing Main Street:** Like the Digital Main Street Grant program, this platform has not yet launched. However, once this program commences, it will guide businesses to develop successful business models aimed at long-term growth and digital competencies, with an overarching goal of providing small businesses with the tools and strategies necessary to successfully weather any future challenges. Businesses can sign-up now to receive information on the program as soon as it launches.

The Digital Main Street platform will carry on delivering and maintaining its existing programs. Among those existing programs are the DMS Academy which provides free workshops and training to businesses through regular webinars on topics relevant to small business needs. Upcoming webinars include sessions on data privacy law, ecommerce options for small businesses, and marketing budgets. The DMS Lab will also continue to operate on the Digital Main Street platform, which is a virtual retail tech incubator that facilitates partnerships between startups and Business Improvement Areas (“**BIA**”) to pilot new technologies with small businesses.

After a new business is onboarded and undergoes a free digital assessment, Digital Main Street will help the small business identify products and services offered by vendors across communities in Ontario to help you meet your digital transformation goals (in addition to always providing you with access to the platform’s free tools). In this way, Digital Main Street helps your business in the growth of its online presence while also supporting other local Ontario businesses thereby creating a more robust and independent business environment.

How Will This Help My Business?

It can be daunting to break into new markets, but the investments made by the provincial and federal governments into main street businesses will have wide-reaching impacts for those wishing to expand their online reach. It can be an overwhelming task for a traditional bricks-and-mortar business to transition onto an e-commerce platform, especially if you have had little experience conducting your business online historically. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the hand of many in the business world to move online more quickly than they may have anticipated. The Digital Main Street platform will help equip those small businesses and

entrepreneurs with the tools they need to engage customers in and make the jump to the digital e-commerce market as successfully as possible.

Ontario businesses that are looking to pivot their operations or enhance their presence in the e-commerce marketplace should consider leveraging Digital Main Street as a means to help you mitigate and recoup lost revenue and develop long-term strategies to “future proof” your business against unexpected challenges down the road. By integrating the experience and resources of digital innovators and specialized advisors with the needs of your business, participation in Digital Main Street can help Ontario small businesses become more resilient and competitive as the province works hard to reopen in a vastly different post-pandemic business world.

by Robert Piasentin and Shannon Ste. Marie

A Cautionary Note

The foregoing provides only an overview and does not constitute legal advice. Readers are cautioned against making any decisions based on this material alone. Rather, specific legal advice should be obtained.

© McMillan LLP 2020