

REBUILD THE BLOCK SMEAL STUDENT SCHOLARS

CASE STUDY



Background

Rebuild the Block works to aid and develop black owned businesses throughout the United States by serving black business owners within communities with reputable sources. Rebuild the Block started with the intention of helping black-owned businesses who were hit particularly hard throughout the past year by creating social media campaigns and a GoFundMe focused on raising money. Started by two Penn State students, Alexis Akarolo and Zelnetta Clark, at the beginning of the pandemic and has since grown to having seventeen people on their staff. Rebuild the Block faces the challenge of raising funds through online giving methods and then going through a deep analysis of companies in need in order to allocate the funds based on the situation. All the companies that Rebuild the Block donates to are black owned who have struggled to stay afloat due to the current political and economic climate.

Black-owned businesses have been hit hardest by the pandemic due to a lack of resources and government aid. Government Paycheck Protection Programs have only reached 20% of eligible black-owned firms in the past year. With active black-owned businesses declining rapidly daily, by over 40% in recent months, Rebuild the Block saw the opportunity to raise funds to help sustain the operation of black-owned enterprises.

Creating the nonprofit began with the creation of a GoFundMe and a critical social media push. As news stations nationwide picked up the story, Rebuild the Block was able to expand their application process to review as many struggling businesses as possible. Picking and allocating said funds were based on the application the businesses submitted and ended with a variety of businesses being supported by Rebuild the Block. By focusing on black-owned businesses, Rebuild the Block is able to help growing the future and the history that comes with it.

Currently, Rebuild the Block has raised over \$200,000 in donations which have been allocated to twenty plus black-owned businesses. The final goal is to help as many black-owned businesses as possible through the strong online platform partnered with the passion that lays within the team themselves. The team itself holds the power to create a strong, growing nonprofit that benefits black owned businesses even after the pandemic is over.



How CBoS was Involved

The Center for the Business of Sustainability focused on the goal of introducing Rebuild the Block's goals of growth to Penn State students in the business of sustainability class in the fall of 2020. Three businesses were brought to the different sections of the BA441 class in order to research and bring recommendations to by the end of the semester including Purdue, Rebuild the Block, and Verizon. By introducing Rebuild the Block to the students at Penn State, a fresh, new perspective is offered that advances not only Rebuild the Block itself, but the outreach that in turn brings new donors and new companies that need Rebuild the Block's help. Led by professor Erik Foley, the students in BA441 were able to focus on different initiatives that could help aid in Rebuild the Block's growth.

Students focused on the history of black-owned businesses and the unique challenges and strengths that come with being a business owner, the social media efforts the team uses, the power of partnering with other black-owned businesses to increase outreach, and the importance of strong data-based efforts that contribute to the understanding of how Rebuild the Block is doing, how they began their efforts, and their plans for the future. By having concrete focuses, students were able to dive into research, meet with the team, and develop a recommendation plan. The students were split into separate groups to further research these areas and to make recommendations directly to the Rebuild the Block team through various Zoom sessions.

While the students were researching and creating their business plans based on the lessons learned throughout the class and their backgrounds in Smeal, it was important to keep in mind attainable goals for the company to reach. This includes making recommendations that can be achieved by Rebuild the Block in the future by their team. The plans needed to be molded to fit a nonprofit organization that fits the brand of Rebuild the Block without overwhelming the team with work that cannot be supported long term.



Recommendations

Rebuild the Block's demographic for donations can range from teenagers to older generations focused on change. In order to continue their goal of helping black-owned businesses survive through the past year, Rebuild the Block needs to refocus their social media efforts. Social media has become not only a great tool for businesses to market to new customers, but it has also become necessary to keep up with the industry itself. Rebuild the Block currently utilizes a variety of different social media platforms, but there is room for the company to grow.

The first step for Rebuild the Block in terms of their marketing strategy is to diversify the social media platforms they are currently using, and the time invested in them. Social media sites like Twitter and Instagram may appeal to younger generations, while LinkedIn may appeal to businesses who may want to partner with Rebuild the Block. Different social media platforms appeal to different demographics, so by spending time focusing on fine tuning their social media platforms, Rebuild the Block will better support black owned businesses.

Rebuild the Block could continue to grow using various resources and work cross functionally. By spending time transitioning their social media accounts into business accounts, they have an outward appearance to new potential donors that the company has a strong mission. By visualizing their efforts throughout their platforms, Rebuild the Block can demonstrate the impact of the donations and these grants. The key to these platforms is to grow Rebuild the Block's support base and keep participation high on a continuous basis.

Focusing on emotional based marketing strategies throughout all the platforms will focus on a targeted audience and help reinforce their mission. Their mission and their values revolve around their connection and passion to the black community. By choosing one market to focus on and moving from there, Rebuild the Block will be able to choose different emotional stories from the companies they have helped to appeal to each individual segment. These strategies need to be well thought out and tested to ensure that they are supporting Rebuild the Block's mission and keeping their purpose at the center of all that they do.

A strong data analysis plan is essential to the growth and productivity of every company and nonprofit working in today's world. To focus on their data building skills, Rebuild the Block needs to focus on donor and recipient implementation, collection and analysis, and the future of stronger software within the company. These goals can help Rebuild the Block be introduced to data collection that can implement more focused strategies in the future.

Gathering data on the donors of Rebuild the Block and the companies who receive the grants can be easily accomplished through a variety of tools. Rebuild the Block could use Google Forms displayed during the donation process for users to fill out. This could give the nonprofit information on their demographics, psychographics, behavioral graphics, and geographics to develop strategies to focus on future targeting those segments. As well, when companies receive their grants, Rebuild the Block should gather similar information to keep track of the companies. That way, they are better able to diversify their portfolio.

After gathering the data through various forms and conversations, Rebuild the Block can analyze the data and report on the findings. This can help Rebuild the Block pick out markets that may not be targeted, areas within the United States that may be a good area to pick a recipient based on donors and finding the areas in which they are failing. This data can be used by various departments within the nonprofit, but the key is to gather the data in the first place, have a plan to analyze it, and to improve based on the findings that Rebuild the Block discovers.

As Rebuild the Block continues to grow, it is important that the data grows as well. Data software improves on a fast basis and the strongest nonprofits are keeping up with it. Rebuild the Block should begin their data collection on a smaller scale with an analyst who has the tools to grow in the future as needed. The variety of software available that can pull the numbers Rebuild the Block may need can specifically meet the needs that a nonprofit may have. As Rebuild the Block's data journey begins, they will need to investigate different strategies for the future.

Rebuild the Block should look into partnering with a more established company to increase awareness and donations. Larger companies are looking for ways to get involved with worthy causes that can benefit specific communities. Rebuild the Block should investigate companies that have a personal relationship to black-owned businesses and are actively making changes to align their companies to the values that Rebuild the Block stands upon. By partnering with a larger cooperation, Rebuild the Block has access not only to the resources that the company has, but also the loyal customers involved. Loyal customers trust the companies they choose and if Rebuild the Block were able to focus on a company that would work to gather donations for black-owned businesses, the nonprofit would grow on a monumental scale.

Rebuild the Block could grow into a nationwide, household name. The key for Rebuild the Block's growth is to focus on their mission and to help rebuild black-owned businesses. Focusing on these goals will be critical to the success of the implementation of these new practices. Rebuild the Block's mission needs to stay at the heart of the company as more black-owned businesses are struggling based on the financial status of the economy. Rebuild the Block has unique strengths, but with that comes new challenges. By keeping up with these changes and continuing to build on the relationship that Penn State can offer, Rebuild the Block can grow on a business scale and continue to get the word out to students year after year.

The Center for the Business of sustainability thanks Rebuild the Block, the student teams and Jennifer Krolikowski for the combined effort on this important project. Written by Jennifer Krolikowski, Smeal undergraduate student.

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