

Toliver: Continued Growth Is Vital To The Health Of Black Businesses

By Audrey C. Lodato
Post Staff Writer

"By and large, black business owners do not understand how capitalism works." That's the contention of Lawrence J. Toliver, vice president of Small Business Services, Charlotte Chamber of Commerce.

Adding that too frequently the aspirations of black business owners are not high enough, he continues that blacks do not appreciate "how important it is to always grow. They'll reach plateaus where they're making a comfortable living and begin to guard that level of living as opposed to continuing to grow."

The importance of continued growth to the health of a business becomes evident when you realize that, as competing businesses get larger, your business loses ground. "When others around you grow," Toliver points out, "they increase their ability to take business from you." For example, a business that buys in larger quantities can spend less per item. If you do not keep growing, you in effect steadily fall back in relation to your competitors, "so growing's the only way to go. But not many people know that." He insists, "If your business is not growing, it's not healthy."

The Chamber vice president estimates that there are about 600 black-owned businesses in the Charlotte area. This estimate includes such self-employed occupations as barbers and taxis, as well as other types of business. About one-third of these are what Toliver refers to as non-traditional businesses, i.e., they do business with the general community or with other businesses, rather than operating just within the black community. Some examples of non-traditional businesses in Charlotte are CPA's, office supply companies, fuel and oil, and automobile dealerships.

There has been some progress in non-traditional businesses locally, Toliver notes. "I think things are



Lawrence Toliver
....CCC vice president

gradually improving," he comments. The emphasis is on "gradually." There has been no rapid upsurge in minority business activity or business starts, nor on the size of new firms, he says. Black businesses almost always start out as small stores or service organizations, according to Toliver.

What keeps so many black-owned businesses from becoming greater successes? Toliver believes there are three primary reasons. One is that many fail to learn

how to do business with large corporations. Not only does a small business who wants to sell to a large company need to identify who makes the buying decisions, but the small entrepreneur must cultivate a productive relationship with that person in order to change that key person's buying habits.

A second problem, points out Toliver, is that "many would-be black entrepreneurs are in too much of a hurry. It takes a lot to learn any market, and it's best to learn from someone who knows the market. People think they can work for a company for a year and then start their own business, but it doesn't work that way," he remarks. It takes a long time to thoroughly learn the ropes, and, Toliver suggests, it's best to "learn a market at someone's else's expense."

A third major difficulty facing small black businesses is that of raising money. "If you don't have any, it's hard to get any," is a fact of life when it comes to finances. Franchises cost a lot of money, and despite the fact that some franchising parents are making assistance available, there has been only slow and gradual progress in this area. A key reason, Toliver believes, is that "the people in the black community who have capital or assets do not invest in other black people. They play it safe with their money."

How can black businesses, or those hoping to establish their own businesses, overcome these obstacles? Next week we'll talk to a number of successful black entrepreneurs in Charlotte for their comments.

Social Security Week Proclaimed

Special To The Post

Raleigh - Governor James G. Martin has proclaimed August 11-17 as Social Security Week in North Carolina.

In his proclamation the Governor stated that "August 14 marks the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Social Security Act which created the nation's Unemployment Insurance System, thereby providing income security, independence, and dignity for millions of Americans who have worked all their lives, and for those who suffer in the face of life's contingencies."

The Governor added that almost every American now benefits from the Social Security program. Nearly all Americans reaching age 65 today are eligible for Social Security benefits. More than 120 million people in the United States and 3.1 million North Carolinians work in jobs covered by the system, and 914,000 North Carolinians are receiving monthly cash benefits. Through Medicare, Social Security helps elderly and disabled individuals to meet the rising costs of

medical care.

Elaine Stoops, Assistant Secretary for the N.C. Division of Aging, calls Social Security the most significant piece of domestic legislation enacted in this century. "Born of adversity and tempered by crisis, Social Security has done more to lift and keep Americans out of poverty than any other governmental initiative," she said. "At the time of the signing of the Social Security Bill by President Franklin D. Roosevelt millions of Americans were out of work and the country's industrial plants and financial institutions were in disarray."

The original Social Security law authorized old-age insurance benefits for workers in commerce and industry to be financed by a payroll tax on workers and employers, she said. Over the years, coverage was extended to dependents of retired workers, and survivors (1939), to farm and household workers, to the self-employed, and to members of the armed forces (1950). In addition, disability insurance was provided (1956) and Medicare enacted (1965).

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