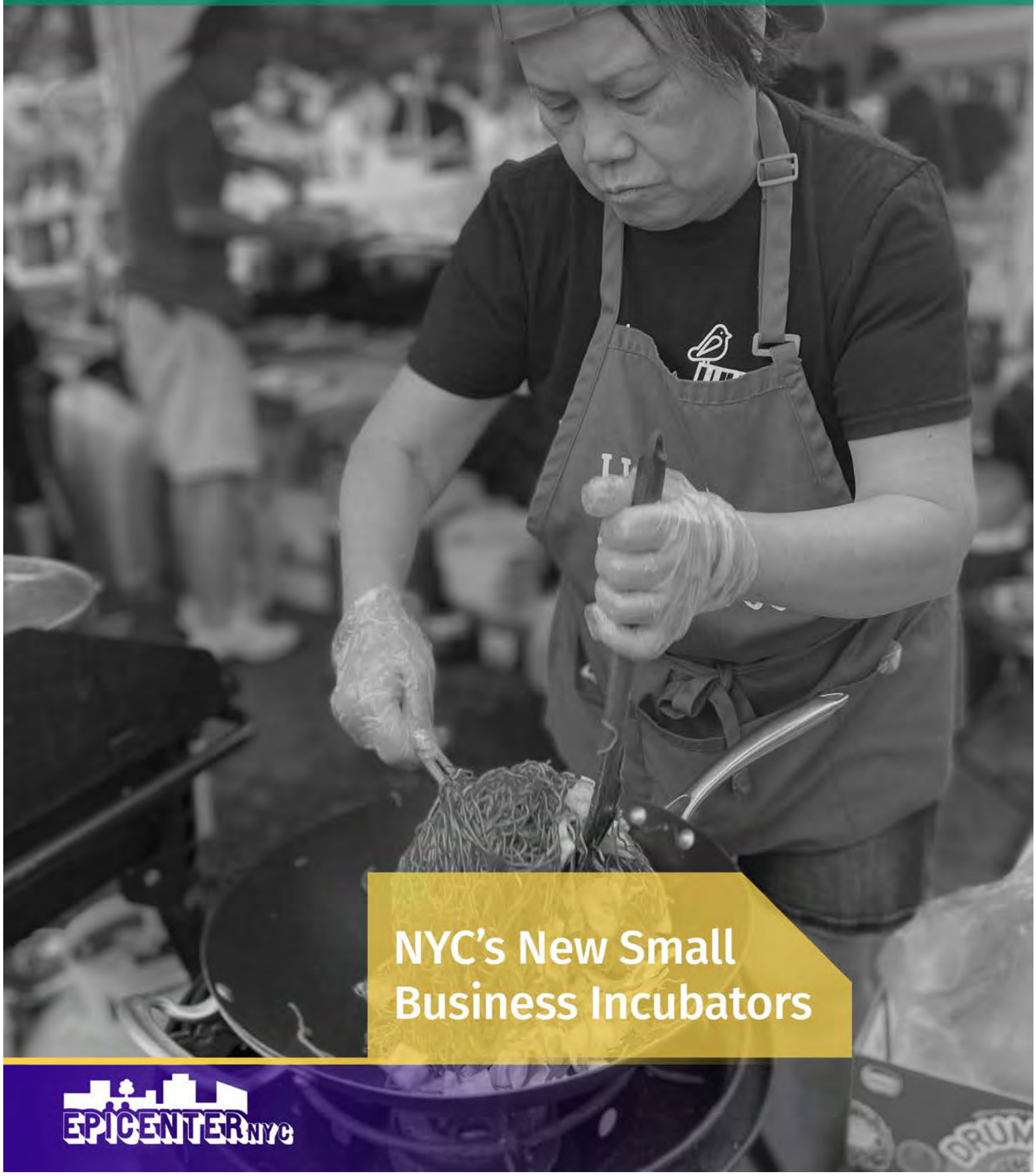
Citizens® 2023 REPORT



NYC's New Small Business Incubators

EPICENTER NYC

Night Markets:
The New Incubators for New York City Entrepreneurs

Night Markets are known by the community as a place to come together to celebrate the diverse cultures that make up a neighborhood by sharing cuisines and arts and crafts. For vendors, they also serve as a catalyst for entrepreneurism by providing small business owners the platform to test new ideas and products with low overhead costs and flexibility while reaching a new customer base.

To measure the ground-level, community impact of two of New York's largest and most notable Night Markets, Citizens and Epicenter-NYC partnered to survey vendors and attendees of the Queens Night Market, Chinatown Night Market attendees, and a citywide selection of small businesses over the course of several weeks during the 2023 season. The report reveals the clear influence thriving Night Markets have on helping entrepreneurs grow their small businesses and building rich, culturally diverse communities.

Key Findings

- **Why Night Markets?** Businesses surveyed say their top three reasons for choosing to set up here: (1) launch a new business, (2) seek community, and (3) share family recipes or culture. Businesses were allowed to select multiple responses.
- **Breeding loyalty:** Among attendees of Night Markets, more than three-quarters (77 percent) of respondents wanted to shop at vendors outside of the night market setting.
- **Hiring locally:** Nearly half of businesses with employees tried to hire from within their neighborhood or the community they serve.

"Doing Queens Night Market was a really intense crash course of being an entrepreneur. It really prepared us to be the perfect salespeople."

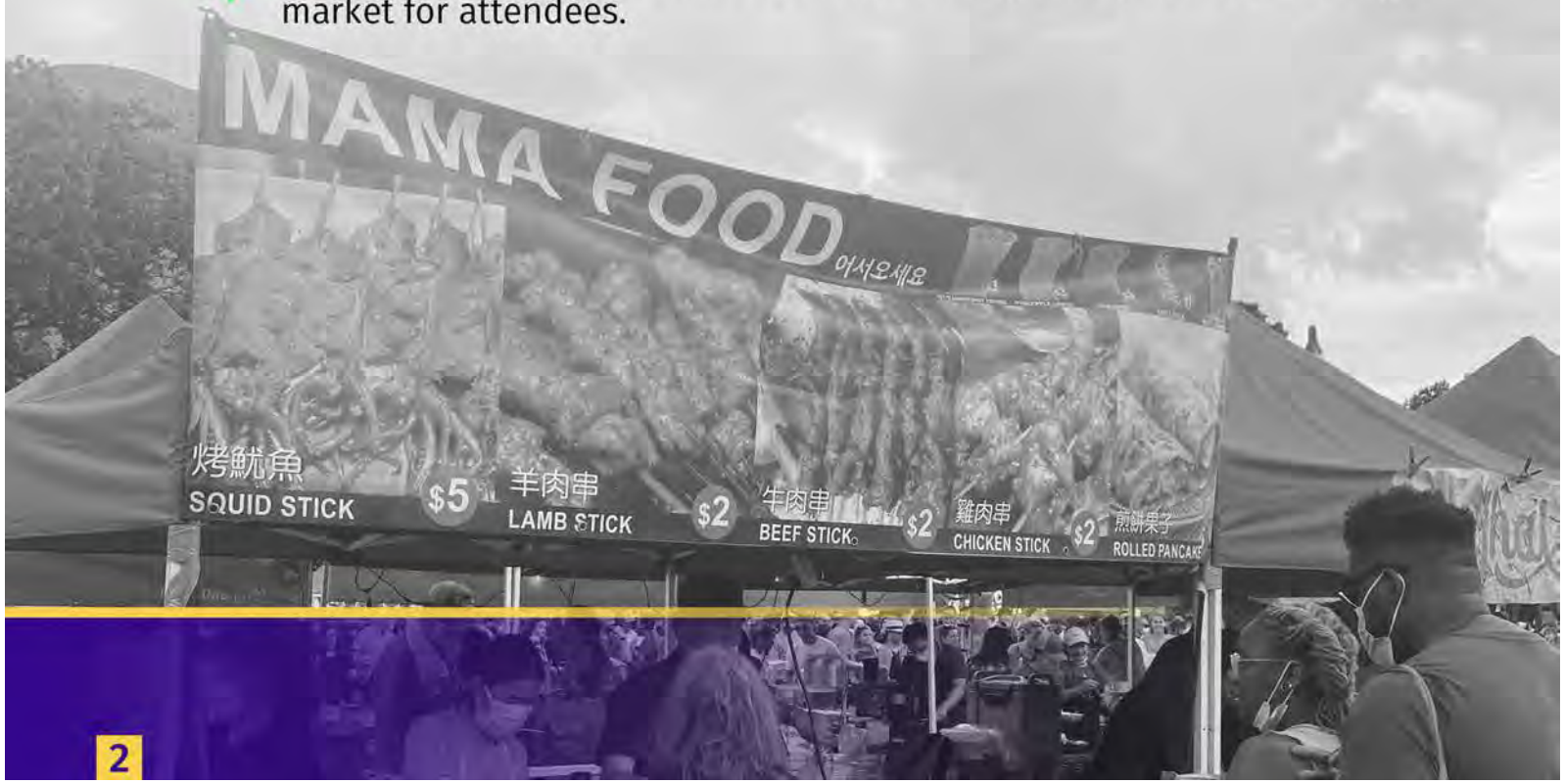
- Cristian Abbrancati, Nose Best Candles Co-Founder

Night Markets:
The New Incubators for New York City Entrepreneurs

The surveying predominantly focused on businesses in Queens and Queens Night Market vendors, underscoring their role as a microcosm for diversity, NYC entrepreneurship and local businesses. The data also spans businesses in the Bronx and Brooklyn, and attendees of both Queens Night Market and Chinatown Night Market to deliver one of the most comprehensive reports on Night Markets in New York City. More than 360 people were surveyed, a mix of entrepreneurs, small businesses owners, New York City residents and tourists.

The Impact

- Night Markets are an on-ramp for prospective small business owners to launch an enterprise with relatively low overhead, before expanding to a more permanent brick-and-mortar location.
- The Night Markets provide a valuable way for vendors to promote, preserve and share their distinct cultural traditions and dishes — especially in an area as diverse and famously multicultural as Queens, nicknamed the world's borough.
- "Cultural experience" and food vendors were primary draws to the night market for attendees.



Covid Hits, Plans Change

Despite Covid disrupting everything, Queens Night Market's influence, for example, ran strong before and post pandemic. It created opportunities for businesses to pivot to other spaces. **"There was a lot of testing, experimenting with different business models and revenue streams during the pandemic, which is a net positive," shared John Wang, founder of the Queens Night Market.**

Burmese Bites

Vending to Queens Center Mall

Founder Myo Lin Thway: "Once the pandemic hit, there was nobody on the street. I said 'Okay. I don't think I can do this any longer.'" But Thway persisted in his quest to bring Burmese food to the masses.

1995 | Debuts Burmese keema palata at a Queens Church food fair
2015 | Launches at Queens Night Market
2017 | Street vending in LIC until 2020
2021 | Opens location at Queens Center Mall

Nose Best Candles

TikTok to Brick and Mortar

Co-founder Cristian Abbrancati:
"Home became just New York, no matter where we were. Our community is everywhere we go."

2019 | Dream of a restaurant or candles business
2020 | Nose Best Candles business launches digitally
2021 | Launches at Queens Night Market in May
2021 | Opens storefront in December

Businesses surveyed cited:

On growth and expansion, more established businesses were much more likely to have moved to a new location or expanded their footprint. Newly established businesses were very optimistic, with 62 percent making plans to expand, and with 27 percent already making changes in their physical locations.

On employment, 72 percent of the businesses relied on paid employees to function and nearly half of the businesses with employees always tried to hire from their neighborhood or the community they serve.

On customer focus, the majority of businesses were very focused on neighborhood residents. In addition, a majority of businesses were either focused or very focused on serving their ethnic community.

Customers surveyed cited:

On attending Night Markets, the most frequently cited reasons were the cultural experience and either the variety or uniqueness of vendors. The survey also asked whether the respondents felt that they were doing something good by buying at the Night Market, 84 percent agreed with the sentiment.

On supporting specific vendors, social media and word of mouth were the primary means of how they learned about the vendor. However, discovering the vendor at a street fair or Night Market was a close third.

On Night Markets' influence, 84 percent of respondents indicated that the Night Market was the first setting where they made purchases from the specific vendors that drew them to the Night Market.

On shopping, about one in three respondents also shopped at vendors at locations outside of the Night Market. However, 73 percent of those shoppers first interacted with those vendors through the Night Market, only later visiting them outside of the Night Market setting. Most of those shoppers would visit the vendors in person rather than online or by phone.

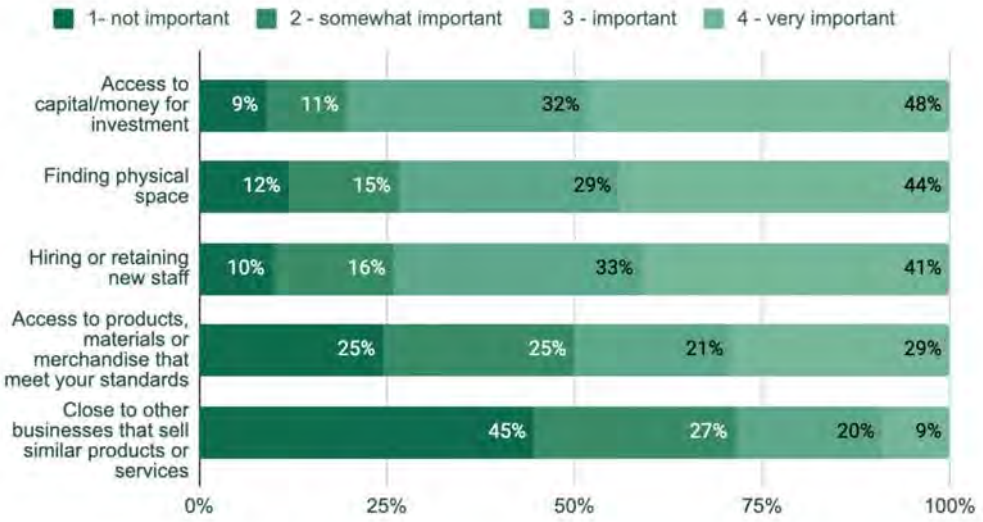
Night Markets have incredible sway in driving consumer interest for the vendor. Customers say they seek out products beyond the market's season, which generally spans April to October, and also prefer in-person shopping close to their home.

There is a strong demand by survey respondents for opportunities to buy from vendors outside of the Night Market setting in general. Seventy-seven percent of respondents wanted to shop at vendors outside of the Night Market setting. The survey respondents largely preferred a physical location rather than an internet-based one, although the majority would like both options. When asked if survey respondents would prefer that vendors establish their physical locations either near their residences or in their usual shopping areas, two-thirds preferred to have the locations near their residences.

"We show up. Everyone shows up... and they learn about our country and culture through a piece of food." ~Jose Rodriguez, El Pernil Ecuatoriano

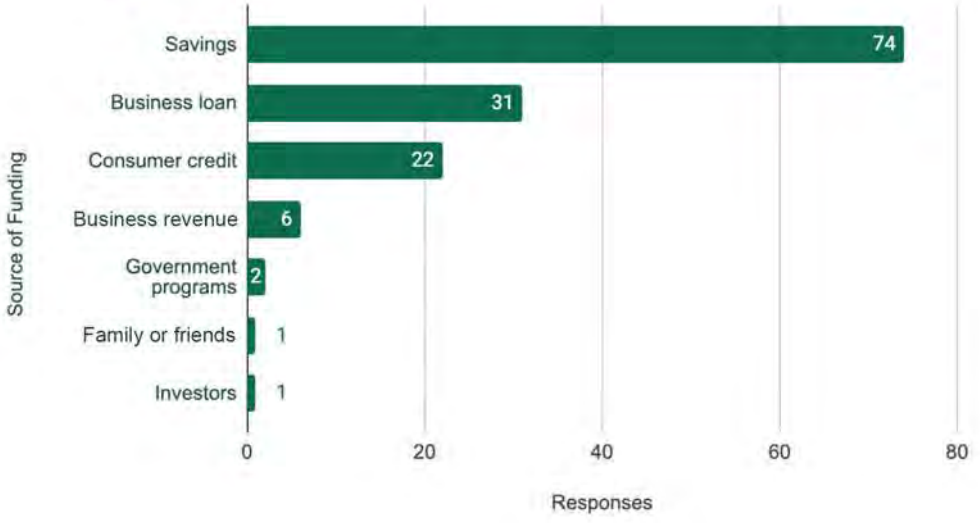
On managing revenue growth, businesses cited access to capital was the most important factor, followed by finding physical space and hiring staff.

Factors for Growing Business



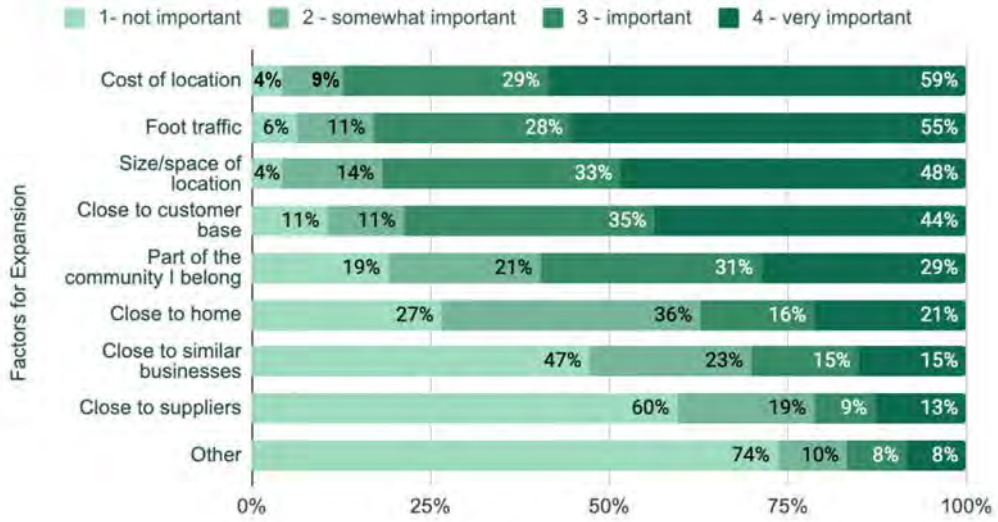
While savings remain the primary source of funding, businesses that are considering growth are more willing to tap business loans and consumer credit (e.g. home mortgages and credit cards). Six businesses explicitly cited business revenue (rather than personal savings in general) as a source of funding for growth.

Sources of Funding for Business Growth



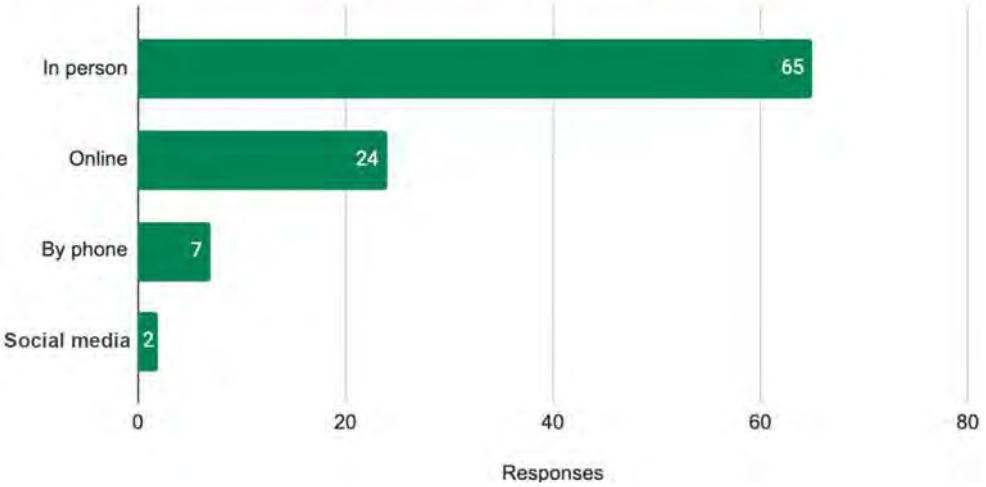
On expanding to a brick-and-mortar site, the four most important factors in selecting a new location were (1) the cost of the location, (2) foot traffic, (3) the size and space of the location, and (4) being close to their customer base. Being part of their community was also an important factor for many business owners, but not to the same extent as the top four factors.

Factors for Choosing a New Location



On the customer front, about one in three respondents said they also shopped at locations outside of the Night Market. However, 73 percent of those shoppers first interacted with those vendors through the Night Market, only later visiting them outside of the Night Market setting. Most of those shoppers would rather visit the vendors in person than online or by phone.

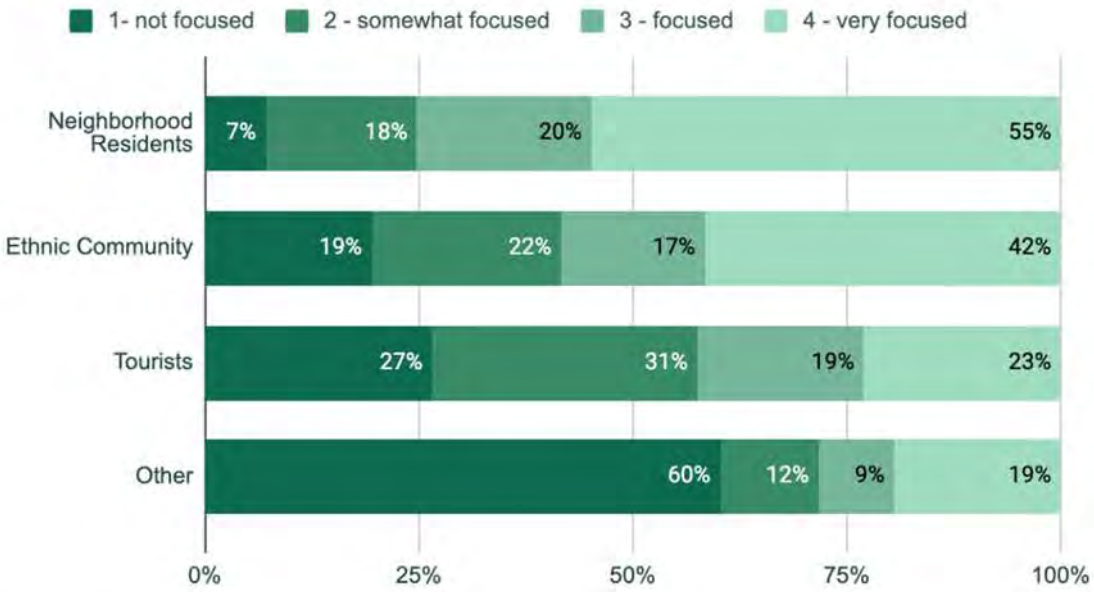
How do you buy from these outside of the Night Market?



When asked about the types of customers businesses focus on, the majority said they were very focused on neighborhood residents. In addition, a majority of businesses were either focused or very focused on serving their ethnic community.

Night Markets are all about the cultural experience for attendees and businesses alike.

Customer Focus

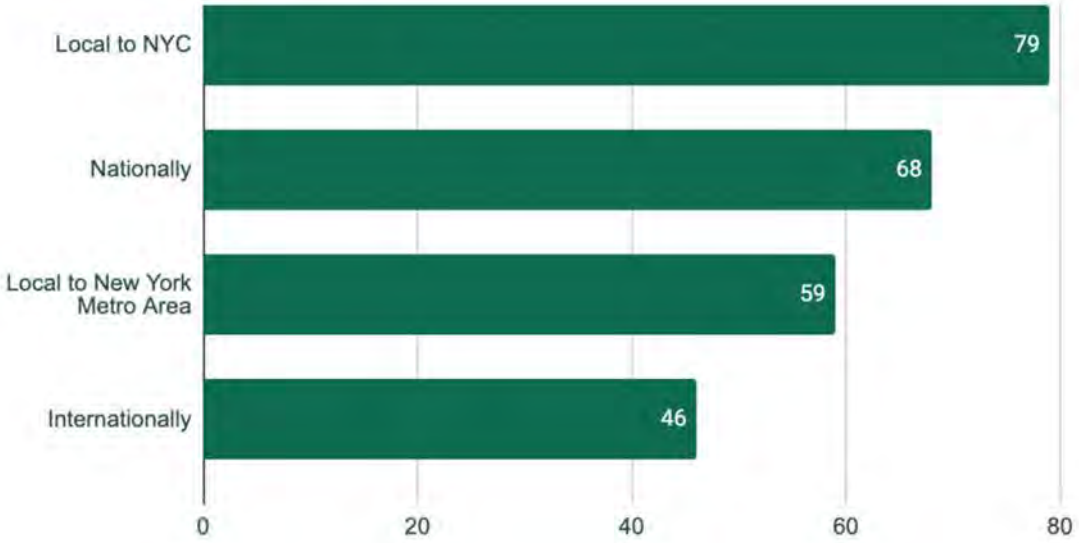


"There's a moment, almost inevitably, every Saturday where I sort of look out in the crowd and it honestly feels like New York City is there — some really representative cross section of what New York City looks like."

~ John Wang, Queens Night Market Founder

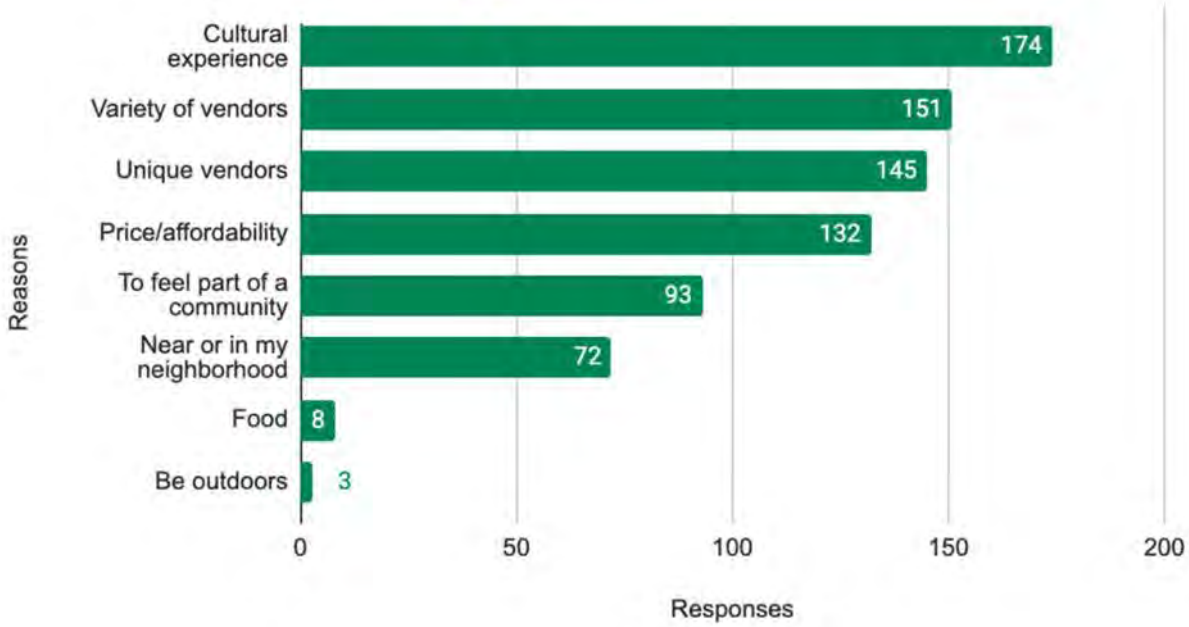
A majority of businesses surveyed make their own products (69 percent), particularly food services (82 percent). In general, the businesses said they source their materials or products most often from within New York City.

Source of Merchandise or Materials



Among customers, when asked why they attended the Night Market, the most frequently cited reasons were the cultural experience and either the variety or uniqueness of vendors. The survey also asked whether the respondents felt that they were doing something good by buying at the Night Market; an overwhelming number, 84 percent, agreed with the sentiment.

What is the reason you visit the Night Market?

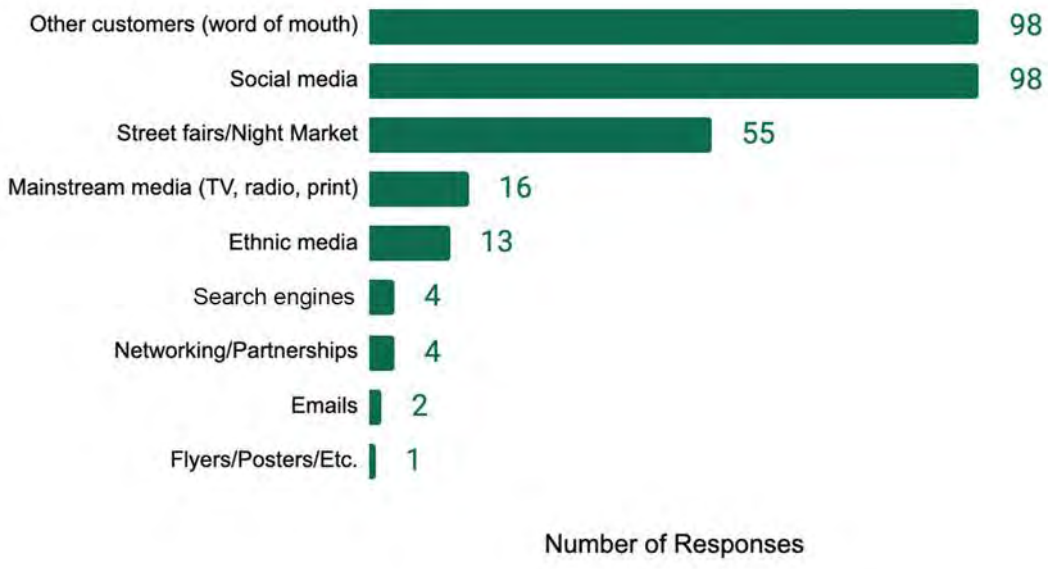


Surveyed businesses primarily relied on word of mouth through their customers and social media to build awareness around their businesses. Street fairs and Night Markets were also used by many businesses to build their brand.

"Helping vendors realize that there is a different marketplace out there and working with them to figure out how to access that. Creating community as well as the kind of commerce that benefits our neighborhood."

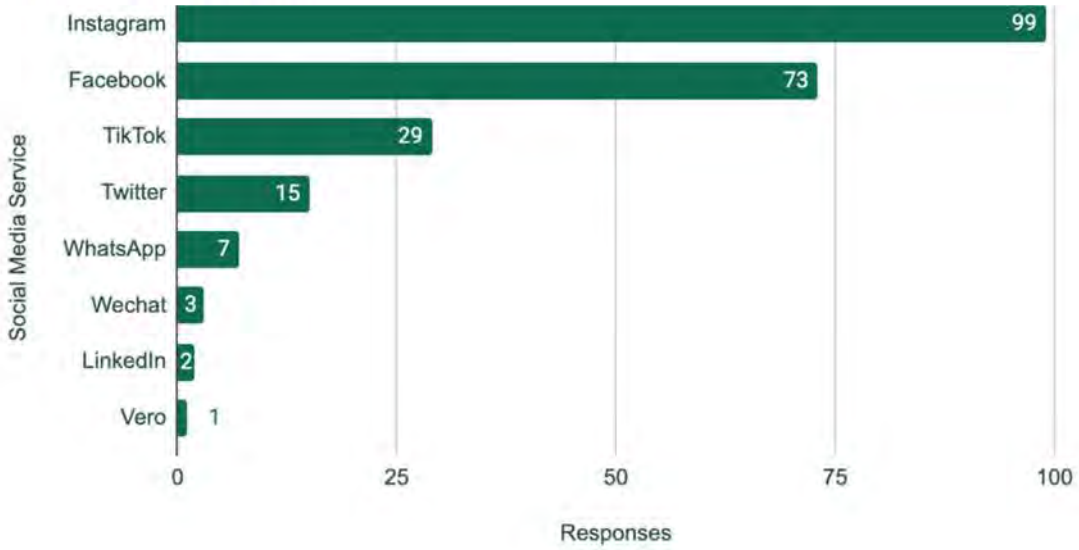
-Amy Chin, Board President, Think!Chinatown

Marketing Channels



The surveyed businesses were most likely to use Instagram and Facebook for their social media outreach.

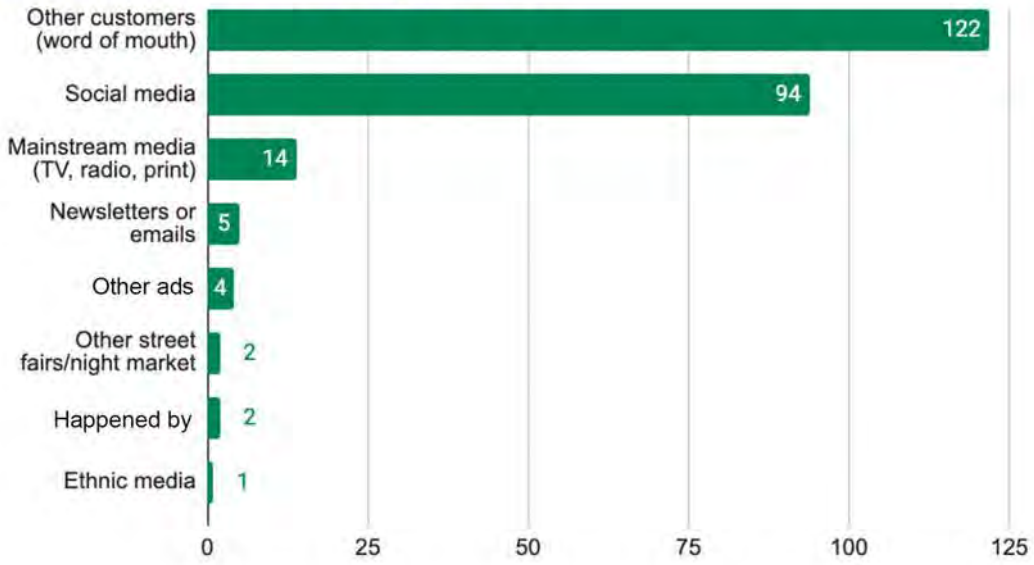
Social Media Services Used



Facebook was most frequently used for marketing by surveyed businesses. However, Facebook is a distant third to Instagram and TikTok as a means of discovery by customers in this survey.

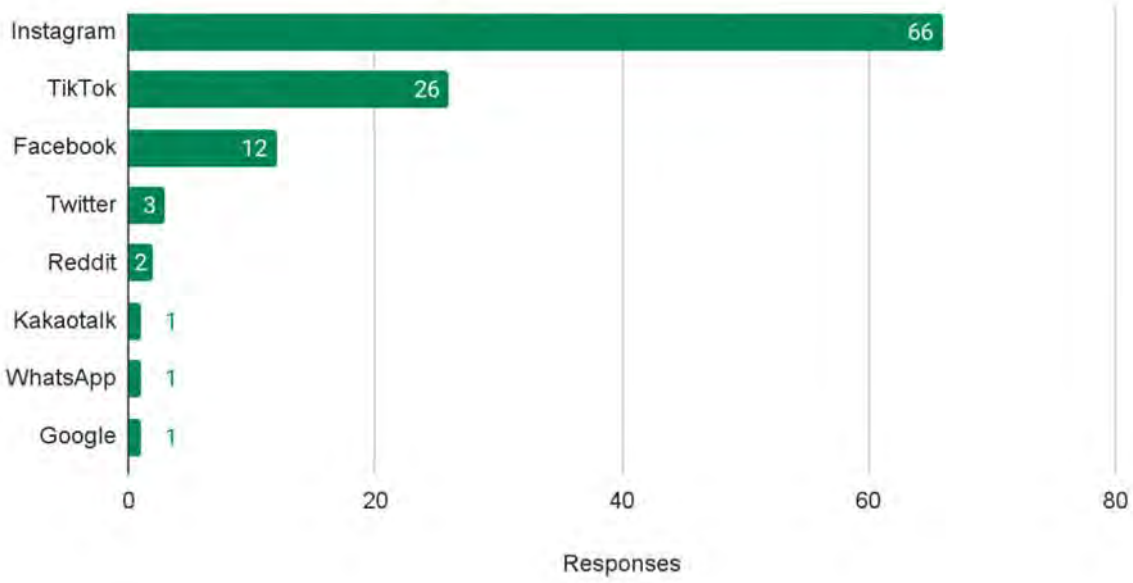
Among customers, word of mouth and social media were the most frequently cited ways of discovering the Night Market. Instagram was by far the most frequently cited social media platform used by respondents to discover the Night Market.

How did you first hear about the Night Market?

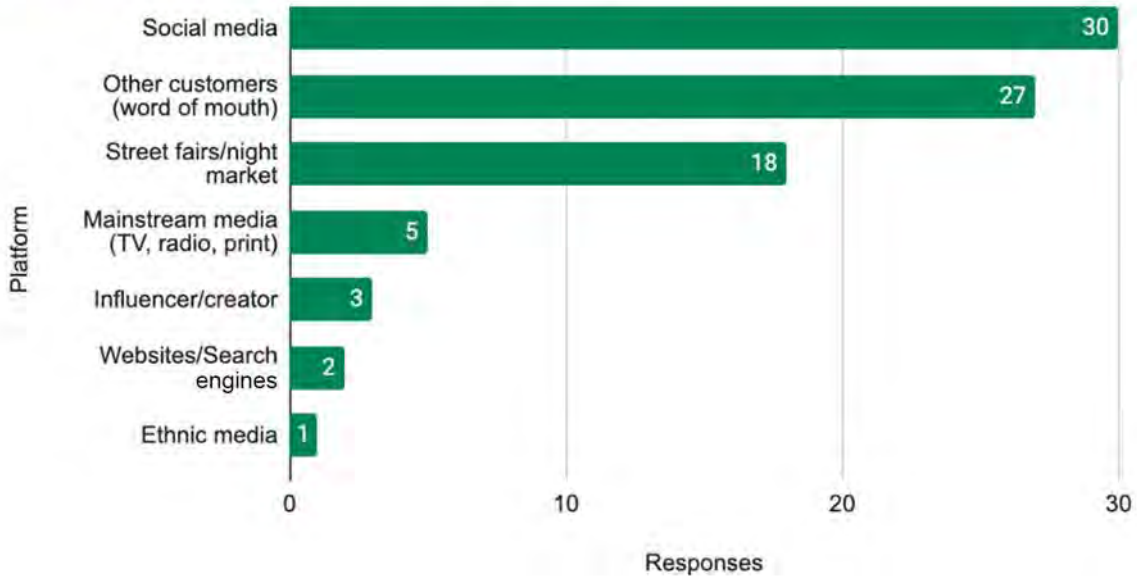


For the specific vendors that drew them to the Night Market, social media and word of mouth were the primary means of how they learned about the vendor. But discovering the vendor at a street fair or Night Market was a close third. Further demonstrating the influence of Night Markets, 84 percent of respondents indicated that the Night Market was the first setting where they made purchases from the specific vendors that drew them to the Night Market. The social media platforms used to learn more about the specific vendors that drew them to the Night Market were similar to the ones used to learn about the Night Market itself.

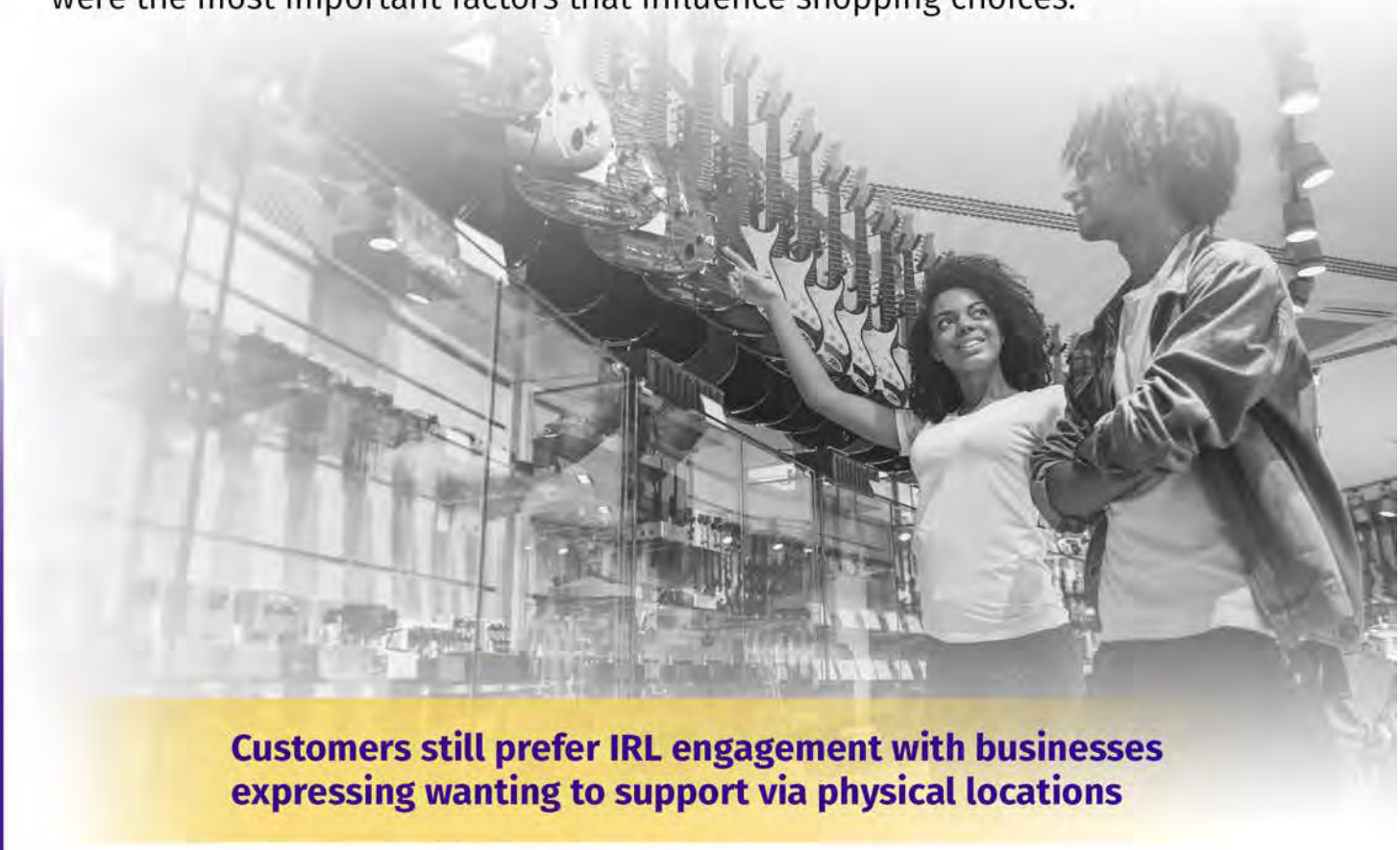
Social media platform: Discovery of Night Market



How did you first learn about these businesses?

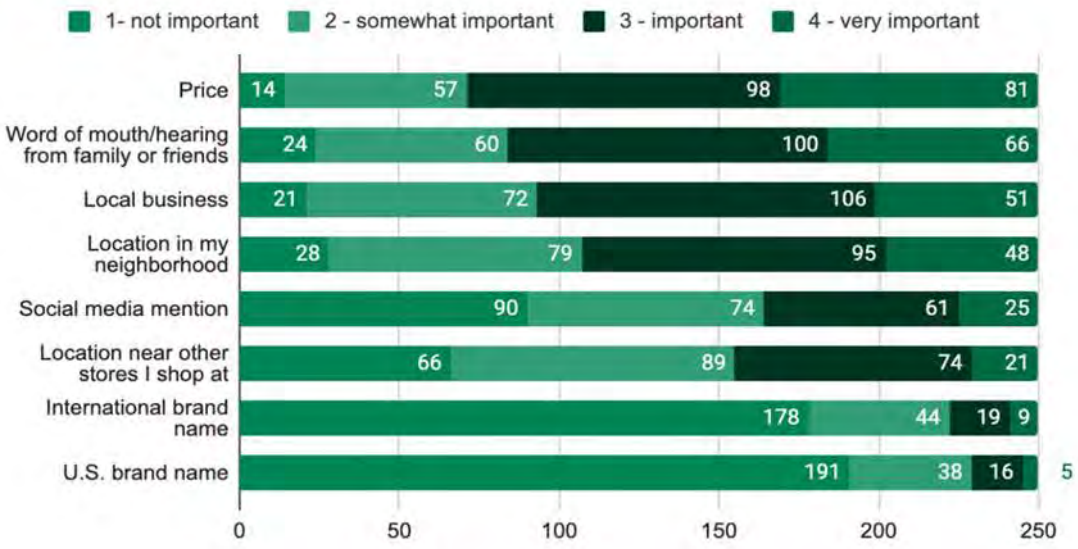


The survey asked respondents about their general shopping preferences. When asked about the main factors they consider when selecting where to shop, price, word of mouth, local businesses and location in their neighborhood were the most important factors that influence shopping choices.



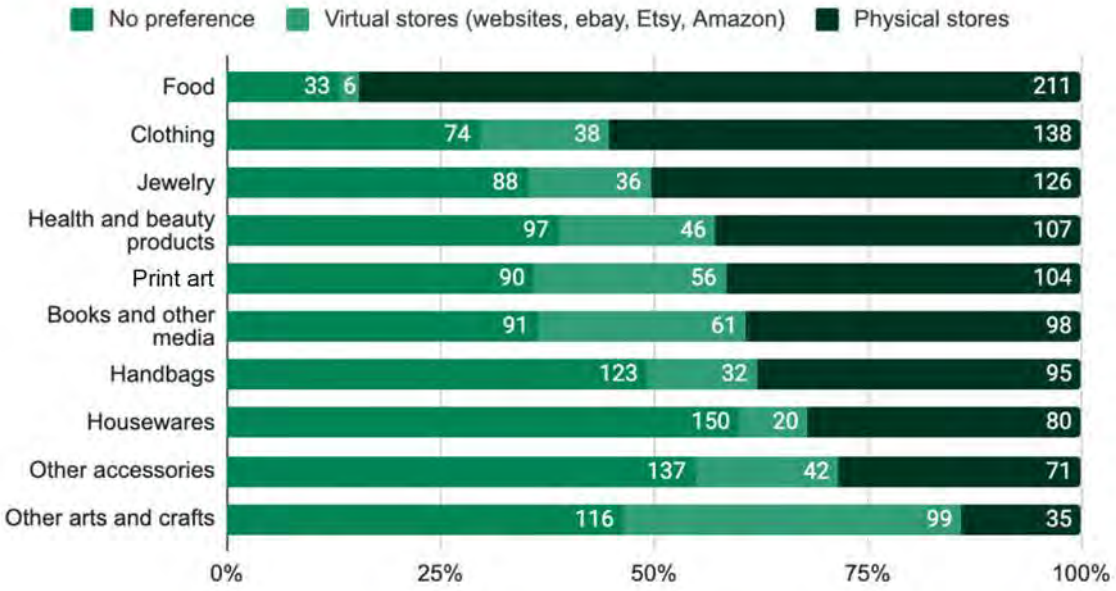
Customers still prefer IRL engagement with businesses expressing wanting to support via physical locations

Factors for shopping choices



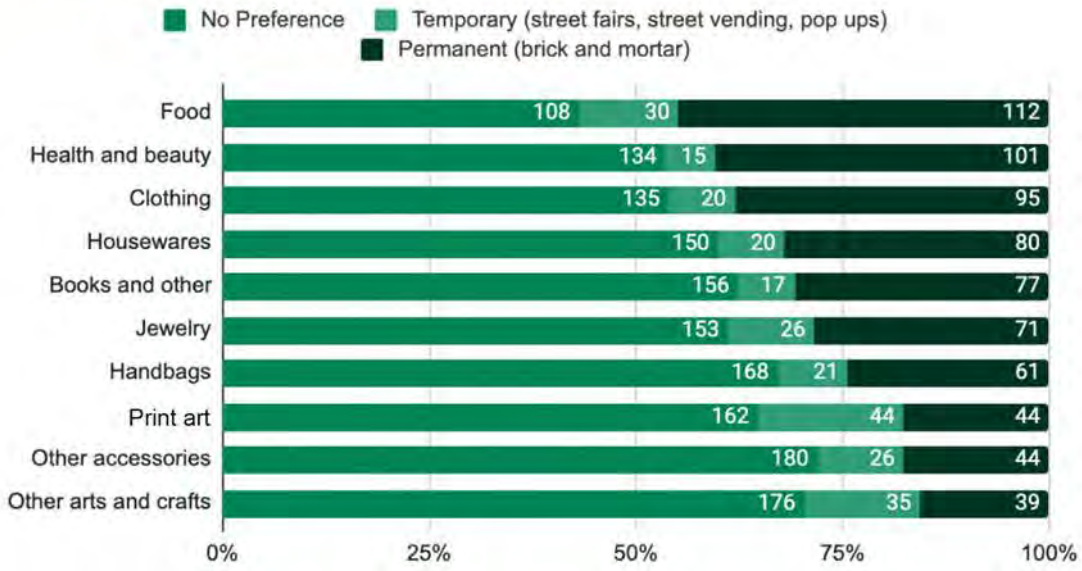
When asked about the preferences for types of locations for different products, respondents indicated a strong preference for physical locations for food vendors. There was also a clear preference for physical stores for clothing and jewelry purchases.

Preferences for virtual or physical stores



When asked about physical locations, attendees preferred a permanent location for food vendors. For other product types, most respondents do not care. When there was a preference, attendees selected permanent over temporary except for the print art and other arts and crafts categories, which had nearly an even split.

Physical Location Preferences: Temporary or Permanent



Epicenter-NYC staff surveyed 113 businesses and 250 people over a span of seven weeks from Aug. 5, 2023 to Sept. 20, 2023 digitally through its platforms, visiting and talking to businesses around the boroughs and in person at the Queens Night Market and Chinatown Market. Howard Shih, a data, research and surveying analyst, designed the survey in coordination with Epicenter-NYC. Epicenter-NYC started as a newsletter to help those at the epicenter of the epicenter in NYC navigate Covid through journalism, an artist program, small business coverage and on-the-ground resources. Today, it is an award-winning multiplatform community journalism organization.

Businesses

A number of business owner characteristics were tracked and compared with data from the 2021 American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata to check for potential underrepresented populations. The ACS data was limited to self-employed workers living in Queens to approximate the target survey population. There are many potential reasons for the survey data to deviate from the ACS data including that the Queen Night Market, for example, attracts a different mix of businesses and business owners than that of businesses in Queens.

Geography

The geographic distribution of where business owners resided had 58 percent of business owners residing in Queens, 10 percent in Brooklyn, 9 percent in the Bronx, 6 percent in Manhattan, 2 percent in Staten Island, and 16 percent outside of New York City. This justified the use of ACS data from Queens Borough as a proxy for the target survey population.

Age

The vast majority of owners (70 percent) were aged 35 to 64 years old, with 24 percent in the 18- to 34-year-old age bracket and 6 percent aged 65 years or older. This distribution is relatively close to the age distribution of self-employed workers who live in Queens from the 2021 American Community Survey, which was 69 percent for ages 35 to 64 years old, 19 percent for ages 18 to 34 years old, and 12 percent for ages 65 years and older.

Language

The survey also found that 22 percent of business owners self-identified as limited English proficient (LEP). This is a lower LEP rate than the LEP rate of 42 percent for all self-employed workers in Queens, suggesting a potential under coverage in the survey of business owners with LEP.

Education

In terms of educational attainment, 26 percent of owners did not have a college degree, 48 percent had either an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree and 26 percent had a post-graduate degree. This distribution was dramatically different from the distribution of educational attainment for self-employed workers in Queens where 59 percent of workers had no college degree, 30 percent had either an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree and 11 percent had a post-graduate degree.

Income

Two-thirds of respondents indicated that their business described in the survey was their primary source of income.

Customers

Age

6 percent were under 18 years old
65 percent were between 18 and 34 years old
27 percent were between 35 and 64 years old
2 percent were age 65 years and older.

Gender identity

65 percent female
29 percent male
4 percent non-binary or gender-fluid
2 percent no response

Languages spoken

9 percent identified as limited English proficient
69 percent were English speakers
13 percent were Spanish speakers
7 percent were East Asian language speakers
4 percent were South Asian language speakers

Geography

49 percent resided in Queens
22 percent resided in Brooklyn
16 percent resided in Manhattan
2 percent resided in the Bronx
11 percent resided outside of New York City
Westchester County and Long Island
California, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, Ohio, Texas and West Virginia

Education

19 percent did not have a college degree
47 percent had an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree

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