LIFT Program Outcomes Report

Learning & Insights for Forward Traction (LIFT)

Turning research into practical tools that help small businesses grow.

SCALEUP | Texas State University

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Acknowledgements

About SCALEUP

SCALEUP is a Texas State University initiative that advances research and practical solutions to help entrepreneurs and small businesses grow. Through data-driven insights, partnerships, and evidence-based programming, SCALEUP supports business owners in building capabilities that strengthen performance, resilience, and long-term success. Learn more at **https://scaleup.txst.edu/**.

Executive Summary

The Learning and Insights for Forward Traction (LIFT) accelerator is an evidence-based digital marketing program developed by Texas State University's SCALEUP initiative to help small business owners strengthen their social media and digital marketing capabilities. LIFT was created in direct response to SCALEUP's research on underserved businesses, which found that after financing, finding new customers and building external engagement were among the most common "extremely difficult" barriers to growth.[1] Marketing, especially practical, low-cost digital marketing, emerged as a scalable intervention area.

In the fall of 2025, the LIFT program was launched. All instruction and activities were held online over a 6-week period with 350 entrepreneurs being admitted from a national pool of more than 3,000 applicants. Participants received a free 1-year license to LinkedIn Learning and used an AI-powered business coach developed in collaboration with the Texas State Center for Analytics and Data Science.

Key Findings from the LIFT Pilot

- ✓ **LIFT produced substantial gains in marketing confidence and strategic knowledge.** The share of participants who reported **being "very confident" using social media** to grow their business **increased to 73%** (compared to 28% before the program; +45 percentage points). Participants' understanding of **how to use social media** for growth also improved sharply: the share rating their understanding as "good" or "expert" **rose to 97%** (compared to 5% before the program; +92 percentage points).

- ✓ **Goal setting and marketing structure became nearly universal.** Participants reported **major increases** in foundational marketing practices that support consistent execution.
    - Defined social media goals: 46% → 98%   *(+52 percentage points)*
    - Defined target personas: 35% → 94%   *(+59 percentage points)*
    - Content scheduling: 17% → 85%   *(+68 percentage points)*
    - Documenting performance: 11% → 79%   *(+68 percentage points)*
    - Written marketing strategy: 15% → 85%   *(+70 percentage points)*

- ✓ **Participants increased time invested in marketing, signaling behavior change.** Average weekly hours spent on marketing rose from 12.5 hours pre-program **to 22.2 hours** post-program (+9.7 hours; +78%).

- ✓ **Satisfaction and sustained intent were high.** Overall program satisfaction was strong. **96%** of participants reported being **satisfied with the program**, **97%** planned to **continue using what they learned**, and **95%** would **recommend the program**.

Taken together, these outcomes suggest that LIFT supported participants in moving beyond ad hoc marketing toward repeatable systems, including goal setting, planning routines, and performance tracking, which can strengthen long-term execution. The magnitude and consistency of gains across confidence, systems adoption, and continued intent indicate that participants completed LIFT better equipped to sustain marketing efforts and pursue business growth.

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Introduction

Small businesses are among the most important engines of economic mobility in the United States. They generate local jobs, help families build wealth, and strengthen the resilience of communities. Yet the pathway to growth is not evenly distributed. Many entrepreneurs, particularly those operating in historically underserved and under-resourced communities, continue to face barriers that limit their ability to expand, compete, and sustain momentum over time.

While access to capital remains one of the most widely recognized constraints on small business growth, evidence suggests that barriers persist well beyond financing. Entrepreneurs often cite challenges related to customer acquisition, brand visibility, and business development, especially in a rapidly evolving marketplace where digital engagement is increasingly central to reaching customers. In this environment, the ability to build practical, repeatable marketing systems has become a defining factor in whether small businesses can stabilize revenue, grow their customer base, and compete effectively.

The Learning and Insights for Forward Traction (LIFT) accelerator was developed to address this gap. Designed by Texas State University's SCALEUP initiative, LIFT is a six-week, evidence-based digital marketing program that equips entrepreneurs with actionable skills, structured planning tools, and implementation support. The program reflects SCALEUP's research-to-action model, which translates insights from entrepreneurs into practical interventions that respond to real-world barriers to growth.

This report presents outcomes from the 2025 LIFT pilot program, which drew 350 entrepreneurs from a national applicant pool of more than 3,000. Using data from the LIFT baseline (pre-program) and exit (post-program) surveys and additional program administrative records, the report examines changes in participants' marketing confidence, knowledge, and business practices, including the adoption of strategies such as written marketing plans, target customer personas, content calendars, analytics reviews, and documented key performance indicators (KPIs). The report also highlights participant experiences and identifies opportunities to strengthen LIFT's impact and scale.

Digital Marketing as an Inclusive Growth Lever

Because small business growth is a driver of economic performance at all levels, when more small businesses are able to expand successfully, communities benefit through job creation, stronger local supply chains, and broader consumer demand.

National estimates highlight the size of the opportunity. For example, if historically underrepresented firms grew at the same rate as their peers, the U.S. economy could realize a multi-trillion-dollar increase in gross receipts and tens of millions of additional jobs.[2] SCALEUP's

research similarly underscores that accelerating small business growth has meaningful implications for overall economic expansion.

Texas is a particularly important context for understanding and supporting business growth. The state has experienced rapid population growth over the past decade, and much of that growth has occurred in communities that are helping reshape the state's future workforce and consumer base. Strengthening entrepreneurship and small business capacity across these growing markets is therefore essential to the state's long-term competitiveness and economic resilience.

SCALEUP's research, grounded in surveys and interviews with Texas entrepreneurs, shows that while financing remains a leading growth constraint, business owners also consistently point to challenges tied to market engagement. After financing, entrepreneurs identified barriers such as finding new customers and building external relationships among the most difficult challenges experienced when growing their business.[3]

Why Marketing, and Why Now?

Marketing is not simply "promotion." It is a set of business-building capabilities that help firms understand customers, communicate value, and create repeatable systems for reaching markets. In today's economy, digital marketing and social media have become essential tools for visibility and customer engagement, often at far lower cost than traditional advertising. Research on small and medium-sized enterprises suggests that social media can strengthen brand awareness and customer engagement, which leads to referrals, repeat business, and sales.[4]

Photo credit: Salvador Medina, Owner of Salvador Medina Atelier and LIFT participant

However, the benefits of digital marketing are not automatic. Many entrepreneurs struggle to translate online activity into an actionable strategy. They may not know which platforms best align with their goals, how to reach target audiences, or how to monitor performance in ways that improve outcomes over time. Without structure, digital marketing can become reactive and inconsistent, which limits its potential as a long-term growth lever.

LIFT was designed to help entrepreneurs build clarity, consistency, and confidence in digital marketing practices. By combining structured learning with tools that support implementation, LIFT aims to strengthen the systems entrepreneurs use to grow their business. Given the importance and need of marketing-related knowledge, the initial LIFT program focused on the foundations of online marketing with the goal to help participants reach customers more effectively, build relationships, and sustain traction beyond the 6 weeks of the accelerator.

From Research to Action: The SCALEUP Model

In 2019, Texas State University established the Center of Innovation & Entrepreneurship (CIE) to engage faculty, students, and alumni in building solutions that improve communities. In 2020, Texas State approved SCALEUP (Sustainable Cultivation and Advancement of Local Enterprises for Under-represented Populations) as a university-wide program with a mandate to develop evidence-based tools that help small businesses grow. Early support from Frost in 2021 enabled the program to launch its initial group of faculty research fellows.

With a three-year research grant from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, SCALEUP expanded its investigation to identify the systemic challenges small businesses when growing and designed an intervention aimed at one of the most persistent obstacles to growth: customer acquisition and marketing capability. SCALEUP's 2022 research report included an initial statewide survey and interviews. The report identified financing, external engagement, and growth strategies as being among the top growth-related challenge categories for minority-owned businesses, with "finding new customers" cited as an "extremely difficult" barrier by more than one in four respondents.

With additional research, a similar trend was noted across groups of small business owners. Given this, the LIFT accelerator was designed to translate these and additional findings into a practical, scalable solution to deliver structured marketing education that is rigorous enough for meaningful skill-building while also being accessible enough for busy entrepreneurs.

Program Overview: LIFT Accelerator

Learning and Insights for Forward Traction (LIFT) is a six-week accelerator that builds digital marketing capability through a structured curriculum, applied practice, and tools that bridge the gap between learning and implementation.

Program Goals

- Create engaging posts that capture attention and reflect the brand.
- Build community by understanding target audiences and engaging authentically.
- Promote business offerings through consistent, multi-channel content.
- Analyze metrics and use data to refine strategy and improve results.

Participant Support

- Personalized guidance to strengthen social media and digital marketing strategy.
- An AI-powered chatbot coach to support implementation and troubleshoot in real time.
- A free one-year license to LinkedIn Learning (20,000+ expert-taught courses).
- Up to $150 in incentives for completing research activities.
- A certificate of completion from the Texas State University McCoy College of Business.

INNOVATION HIGHLIGHT

AI Business Coach

LIFT offered participants access to a custom-built AI tool trained on small business growth issues and programmed to respond with answers specific to the user's business context, platforms, and goals.

The "AI Business Coach" was built in collaboration with the Texas State Center for Analytics and Data Science (CADS) and developed by an undergraduate student, Dipesh Pandit (Computer Science major).

The tool demonstrates the utility of applied AI projects as an educational and social-impact innovation model as it provided a hands-on, applied learning experience in product development for a university student, while supporting entrepreneurs with valuable implementation assistance.

Six-Week Curriculum Schedule (Fall 2025 Cohort)

Week	Dates	Topic
Week 1	Sept. 2–9	Social Media Marketing Foundations
Week 2	Sept. 9–16	Online Presence: Pick Your Platform
Week 3	Sept. 16–23	Brand Visibility
Week 4	Sept. 23–30	Content Creation
Week 5	Sept. 30–Oct. 7	Customer Engagement
Week 6	Oct. 7–14	Wrap Up & Next Steps

Who Participated

A total of 352 entrepreneurs were admitted into the Fall 2025 LIFT program through a national application process. Participants represented businesses across a range of industries and entered the program with different levels of experience and structure related to marketing.

Geographic Reach

Participants were located across 24 states and Washington, D.C., with the majority based in Texas (82%). This geographic distribution reflects the program's national applicant pool alongside SCALEUP's strong operational presence and recruitment reach in Texas.

Industry Representation

Participants operated across a range of industries. The largest share of businesses were in Accommodation and Food Services (18%), with additional participation across service-based sectors such as home services, staffing, business services, and other professional and consumer-facing industries.

Participant Characteristics and Baseline Marketing Practices

Participants reflected a mix of business types and baseline marketing experience. Approximately 54% of participants were women. At baseline, entrepreneurs reported spending an average of 12.5 hours per week on marketing-related activities, including social media. However, baseline responses indicate that marketing efforts were not always guided by clearly defined goals: 46% reported having social media goals prior to the program.

Photo credit: Paola Pardo, owner of Ailema Charm & Co and LIFT

Fall 2025 LIFT Cohort

- Participants from 24 states + D.C.
- 82% located in Texas
- ~54% women
- Largest industry: Accommodation & Food Services (18%)
- 12.5 hours/week average time spent on marketing (baseline)
- 46% had social media goals prior to the program

Participants also reported varied confidence in using social media for business growth. Approximately 28% reported being "very confident," while 34% reported being "somewhat confident." These baseline patterns suggest that many entrepreneurs entered the program already investing time in marketing, but with differences in strategy and confidence.

Outcomes

LIFT outcomes are drawn from the LIFT Exit Survey (October 2025). Findings below are presented as pre-program versus post-program comparisons. The number of observations varies by question due to response patterns and item-level completion.

1) Confidence and Marketing Knowledge

LIFT produced large gains in participants' confidence and understanding of how to use social media strategically for business growth.

Confidence increased dramatically.

Change in Marketing Confidence: Pre vs. Post LIFT Program
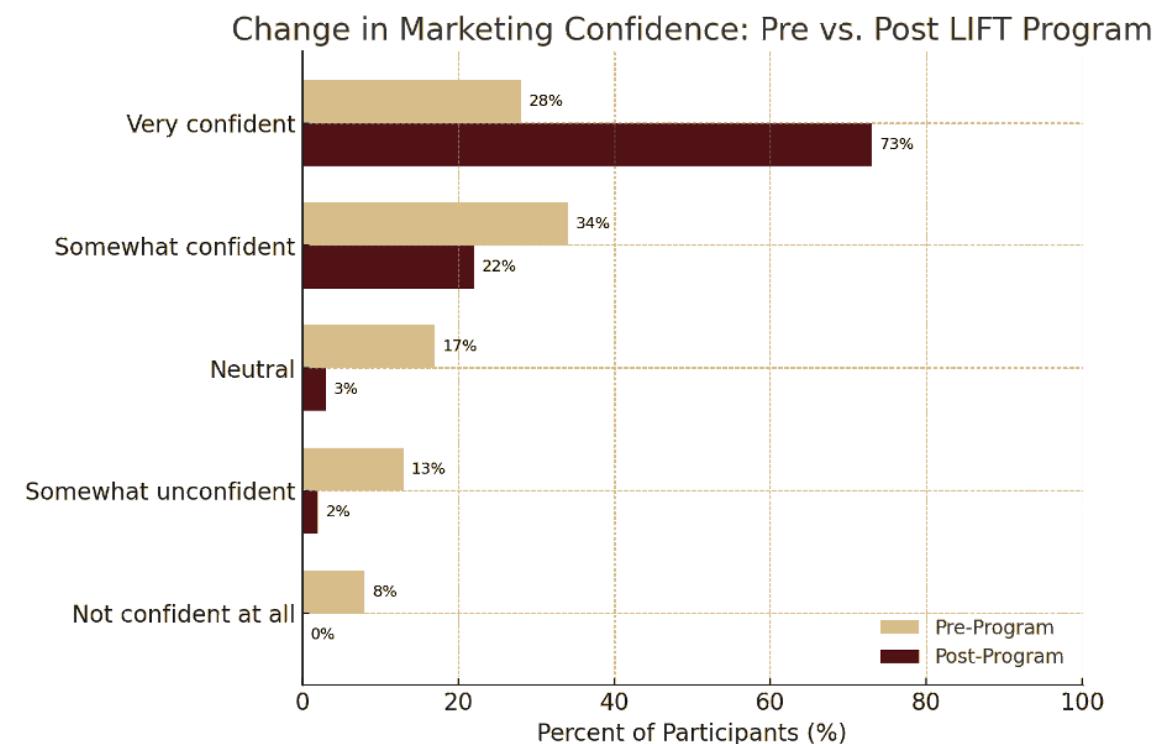
Goal setting became nearly universal.

Social Media Goal Setting: Pre vs. Post LIFT Program

Has goals — Pre-Program: 46%, Post-Program: 98%
No goals — Pre-Program: 54%, Post-Program: 2%

Pre-Program
Post-Program

Percent of Participants (%)
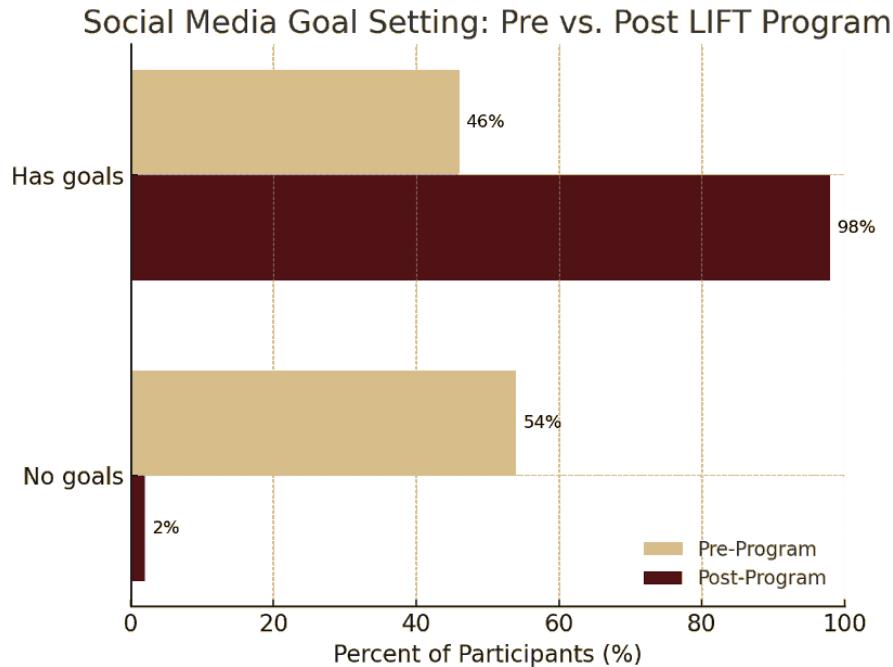
Understanding shifted from limited to strong.

Understanding How to Grow the Business Through Social Media
(% rating 'Good' or 'Expert')

Pre-program: 5
Post-program: 97

Percent
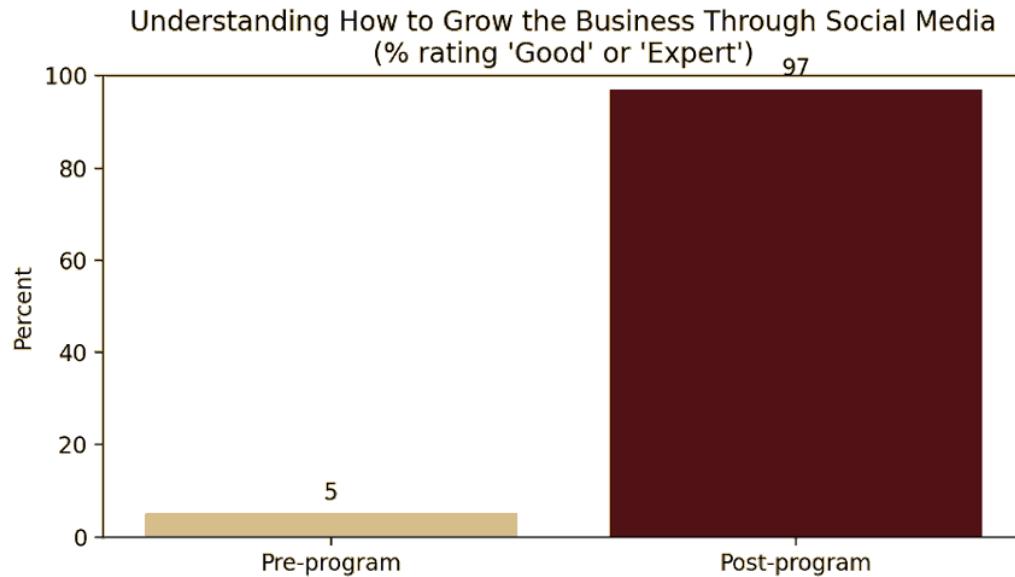
In addition, participants' perceptions of social media's usefulness and ease of use increased across every measured dimension, consistent with technology adoption research that links perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use to sustain adoption and behavior change.[5]

2) From Posting to Planning: Adoption of Repeatable Marketing Systems

Beyond knowledge, LIFT encouraged entrepreneurs to build systems that support consistent execution such as written strategies, content calendars, customer personas, analytics reviews, and KPIs.
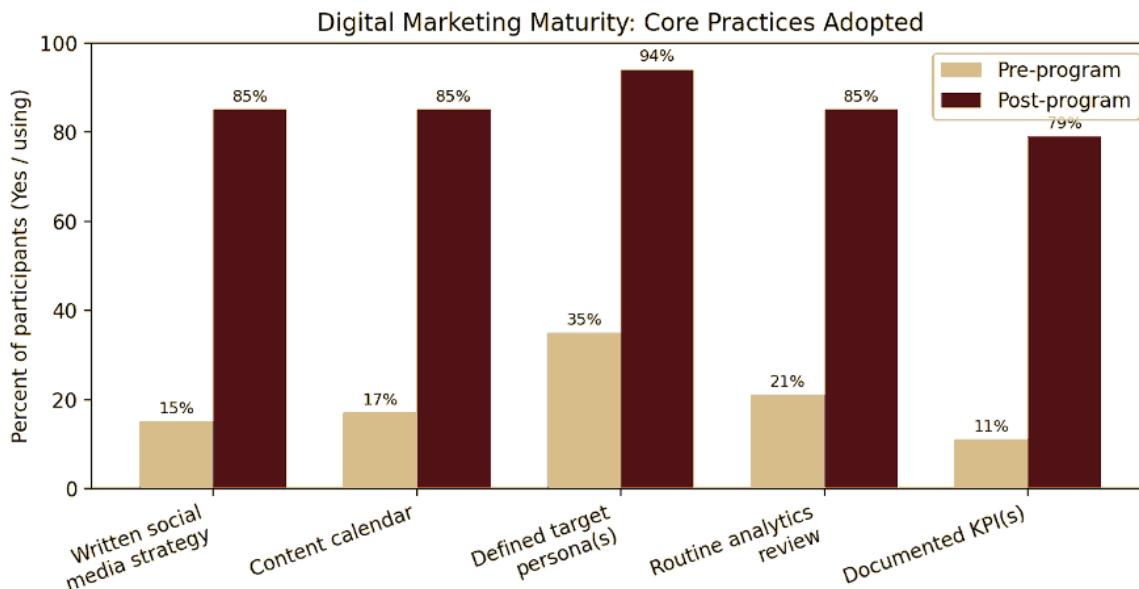
This shift, going from ad hoc posting to intentional planning, matters because consistency and measurement lead to effective marketing results in for small businesses.[6]

3) Behavior Change: Time Invested and Marketing Mix Diversification

Participants increased marketing activity and diversified the channels they use to reach customers, which can reduce over-reliance on a single acquisition channel.

Marketing time increased.
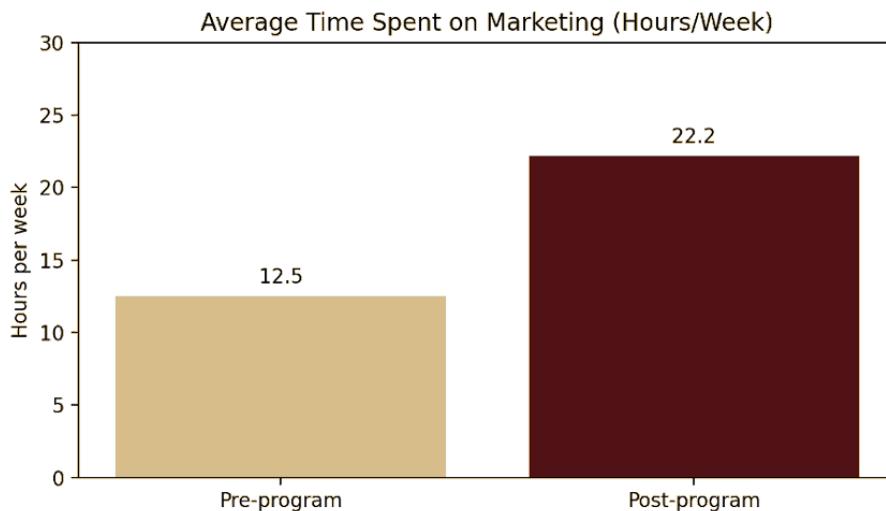
Participants diversified their marketing methods.
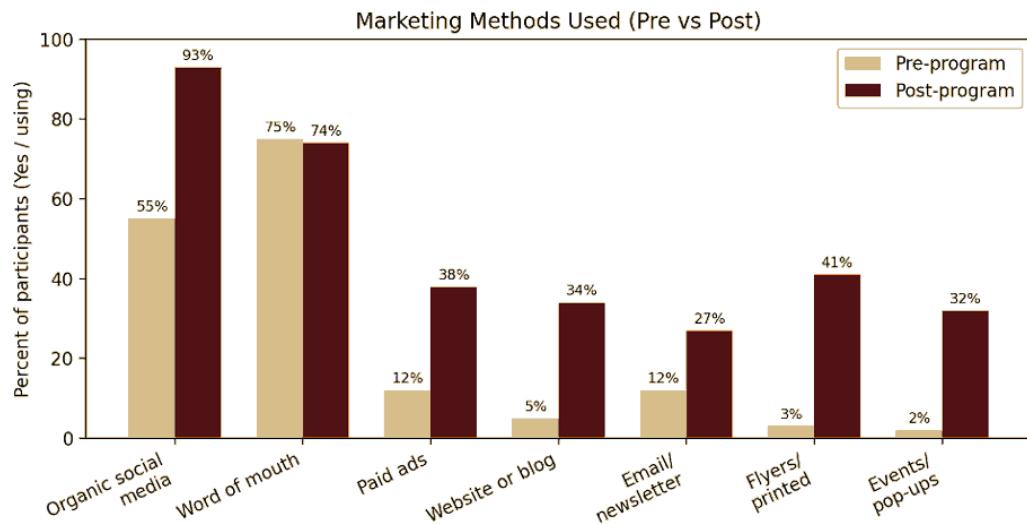
Notably, adoption of websites/blogs and paid advertising increased greatly, which are channels that can complement organic social media by improving discoverability and enabling more targeted acquisition.

4) Greater Visibility and Audience Growth

Participants reported growth in online audiences across platforms, though the distribution was skewed, reflecting both emerging brands and larger, established accounts.

Platform use patterns (pre vs post program).
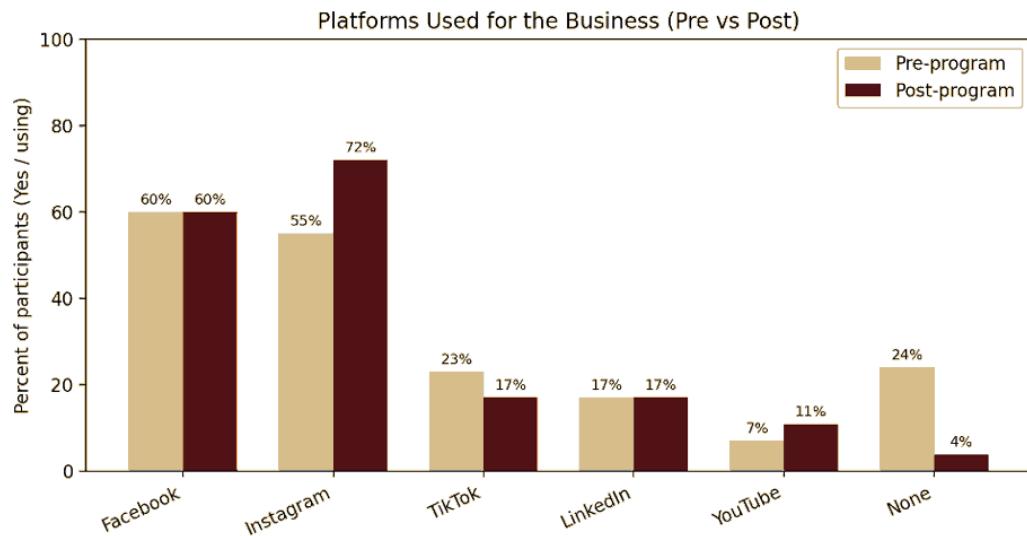
For those actively using the platforms, many participants reported moderate-to-large follower increases over the six-week period, particularly on Instagram and Facebook.

5) Readiness for Growth

While LIFT is primarily a capability-building intervention, participants reported clear signals of growth readiness and momentum. Nearly all participants (97%) plan to expand their business within the next year. They also reported substantial revenue growth trends, with average revenue more than doubling from 2024 to 2026 (projected, self-reported estimates). In addition, strong innovation and experimentation behaviors suggest entrepreneurs are prepared to revise, implement, and work to strengthen their marketing approaches over time. Growth-oriented entrepreneurs are more likely to translate skills into action, and innovation orientation can accelerate the adoption of new marketing practices and technologies.[7]

EXPANSION INTENT	REVENUE MOMENTUM	INNOVATION & EXPERIMENTATION
97%	**2X**	**93%**
Plan to expand within the next year	Average revenue projected to double from 2024-2026	Agree that they use and learn from experiments
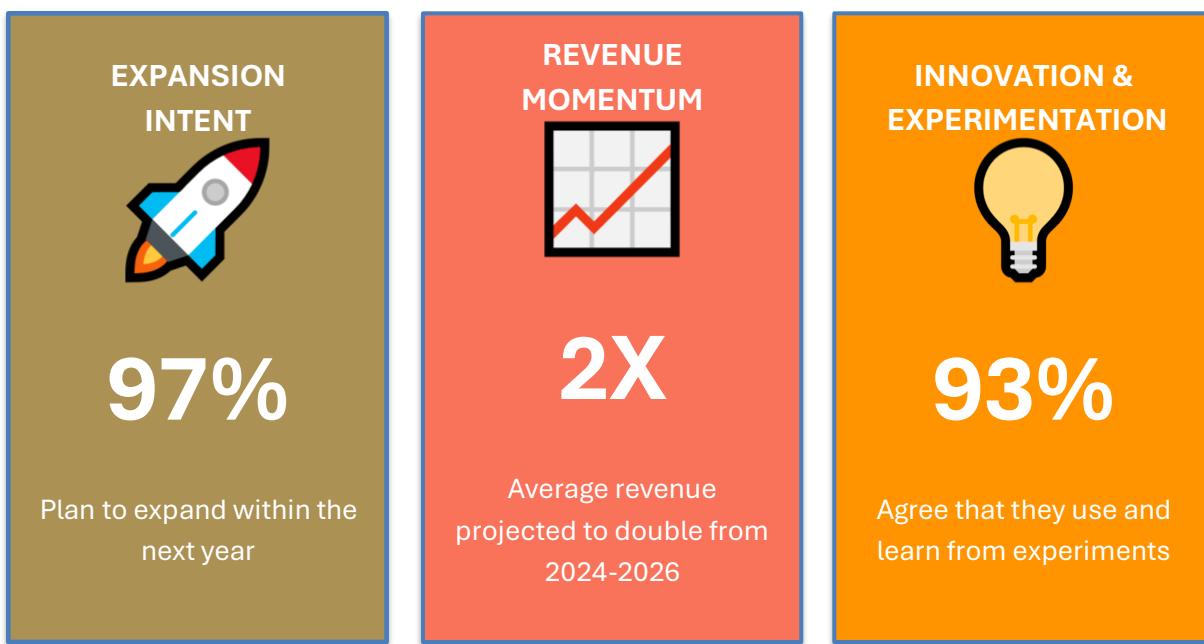
What These Results Suggest

- Participants strengthened marketing capabilities quickly over six weeks, with increases in strategy (goal setting, personas, calendars) and confidence.

- Reported audience growth across platforms was uneven, which is expected given differences in baseline audience size and platform activity.

- The strongest signals of momentum were not just follower increases, but adoption of repeatable systems (planning, tracking, and clearer strategy).

Participant Experience and Value

LIFT's outcomes were accompanied by strong participant satisfaction and perceived value across core program components.

- **Overall satisfaction**: 96% of participants reported being satisfied with the program; approximately three in four reported being very satisfied.

- **Continued application**: 97% reported that they are likely to continue using what they learned, including 85% who were "very likely."

- **Recommendation**: 95% would recommend LIFT to other business owners.

Photo credit: Tara Godby, COO and Co-Founder of Teakeasy Tea and LIFT participant

Perceived value by program component (share rating component as 'valuable' or 'very valuable'):

Program component	Positive rating	Interpretation
Social media course content	96%	Core program strength: practical and engaging
LinkedIn Learning license	95%	Supported ongoing self-learning
Certificate of completion	92%	Added legitimacy and recognition
$100 incentive	92%	Motivating, but secondary to content value
AI chatbot coach	78%	Promising; mixed experience indicates refinement opportunity

Participants also reported that the program's structure, planning tools, and clearer sense of audience and platform fit were among the most useful takeaways.

Participant Voices

Participants described LIFT as a turning point from uncertainty and reactive posting to structure, consistency, and measurable progress. The following quotes are drawn from open-ended exit survey responses (edited lightly for clarity).

"The LIFT program has been instrumental in helping me redefine success through strategy, consistency, and authentic storytelling. It gave me the structure and tools to build a stronger brand presence, connect with my audience, and take measurable steps toward growth."

"The program helped me build the skills and confidence to manage my social media with clarity and purpose."

"I have a better understanding of how to use social media. On the other side, I am a small business owner with a $0 budget for social media and cannot afford some of the planning tools mentioned in the videos, which limits what I can implement right now."

"I've just started implementing the lessons from the program, so the changes so far are small. However, I believe every improvement begins with a first step, and I'm confident that my progress will continue to grow over time."

PARTNER HIGHLIGHT

Dr. Stephanie L. Dailey's Qualitative Methods Course

In Fall 2025, students in Dr. Dailey's Qualitative Research Methods course conducted interviews with LIFT participants and produced a report, *Understanding Participant Experiences in the LIFT Program*, documenting participants' experiences, outcomes, and recommendations.

The results of their analysis found that LIFT was widely perceived as approachable and confidence-building, helping participants strengthen core marketing skills and adopt practical tools that supported more consistent execution.

These perspectives highlight both LIFT's impact and an important implementation insight: capability building is necessary but not always sufficient. Entrepreneurs may continue to face constraints related to time, budget, and access to supporting tools, which could suggest the value of complementary ecosystem partnerships (e.g., software access, microgrants, marketing services, and mentoring) in future programming.

What's Next: Scaling Impact Through Partnerships

The first cohort demonstrated both strong demand and strong outcomes. To deepen impact and scale access, SCALEUP is exploring the next phase of LIFT that strengthens implementation support and expands capacity.

Program improvement pathways

- Strengthen the AI Business Coach experience through improved personalization and clearer workflows.
- Add deeper modules on conversion to turn engagement into leads and sales. Participants identified this as an important next-step skill area.
- Expand low-cost tool options and templates for entrepreneurs with limited marketing budgets.
- Develop an alumni pathway such as peer learning, office hours, and community partnerships to sustain adoption beyond the six-week accelerator.
- Implement longitudinal follow-up surveys (e.g., 6- and 12-month) to track business outcomes such as revenue, customer growth, and job creation.

Photo credit: Giovanna Villapando, Owner and Founder of La Catrina Mexican Shop and LIFT participant

Partnership opportunities

- Funders and corporate partners can strengthen participant support through increased access to marketing tools, microgrants, mentoring, and community-building resources for more personalized guidance.
- Chambers of commerce and entrepreneur support organizations can serve as recruitment partners and provide local implementation networks.
- Financial institutions can complement marketing capability with capital readiness support and trusted relationship building.
- Technology partners can provide product access, training, and discounts for high-impact tools that small business owners may not be able to afford.

LIFT demonstrates a scalable model that combines rigorous university-based research, practical faculty-designed curriculum, and effective support mechanisms to deliver measurable capability gains for small businesses. With strategic partnerships, LIFT can reach many more business leaders and help accelerate economic growth.

Appendix

A. Methodology

This report summarizes outcomes from the first cohort of the LIFT accelerator and documents evidence of capability gains, practice adoption, and participant value. The evaluation is designed to support continuous improvement, inform partners and funders, and build an evidence base for scaling.

Data sources

- Program administrative data: applications and admissions, program participation, and completion records.
- SCALEUP LIFT Exit Survey (October 2025): includes post-program measures and, for multiple items, pre-program versus post-program comparisons reported by participants.
- Open-ended survey responses: qualitative insights into perceived success, most useful elements, and recommended improvements.

Measures

The exit survey includes multiple outcome domains:

- Confidence and knowledge (e.g., confidence using social media, understanding of how to grow through social media).
- Behavior and practice adoption (e.g., marketing time investment; use of content calendars; KPIs; target personas).
- Digital channel diversification (e.g., adoption of websites, paid ads, email newsletters, community-based outreach).
- Visibility indicators (e.g., follower count and self-reported follower change by platform).
- Technology perceptions (perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use), aligned with established constructs from the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989).
- Participant satisfaction and value perceptions (including likelihood of continued use and recommendation).

Analysis approach

Analyses are descriptive and include percentage-point (pp) changes for categorical indicators (pre vs post) and mean differences for continuous indicators. The number of observations varies by item due to survey completion patterns. For example, the marketing hours comparison included 313 pre-program and 226 post-program responses, and the follower count summary included 217 responses.

Confidentiality

All results are reported in aggregate form. Open-ended responses are presented without identifying information and are edited lightly for clarity.

Limitations and Considerations

Most measures in this report are based on participant self-reporting and may be influenced by social desirability or recall bias. In addition, the evaluation design does not isolate causal impact as there is no experimental or matched-comparison group. As a result, observed changes are consistent with program influence but may also reflect external factors, concurrent learning, or other factors. Certain estimates, particularly revenue projections, should be interpreted as directional indicators rather than precise measures of impact.

Despite these limitations, the magnitude and consistency of changes across multiple outcome domains including confidence, systems adoption, and channel diversification, provide strong evidence that participants completed the LIFT accelerator program in Fall 2025 with greater capability and stronger readiness to execute sustained marketing efforts for their small business.

B. Key Outcome Metrics

The table below summarizes selected metrics from the LIFT Exit Survey. Percentages reflect the share of respondents reporting the relevant behavior or response category.

Metric	Pre-program	Post-program	Change
Very confident using social media to grow the business	28%	73%	+45 pp
Has set social media goals	46%	98%	+52 pp
Rates understanding of social media for growth as "good" or "expert"	5%	97%	+92 pp
Uses organic social media marketing	55%	93%	+38 pp
Has a website or blog	5%	34%	+29 pp
Uses paid advertising (online/offline)	12%	38%	+26 pp
Maintains a written social media strategy	15%	85%	+70 pp
Uses a content calendar	17%	85%	+68 pp
Has defined target-audience personas	35%	94%	+59 pp
Reviews analytics routinely	21%	85%	+64 pp
Uses documented key performance indicators (KPIs)	11%	79%	+68 pp
Average marketing time (hours/week)	12.5	22.2	+9.7
Satisfied with the program	—	96%	—
Likely to continue using knowledge learned	—	97%	—
Would recommend the program	—	95%	—

C. References

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[2] U.S. Department of Commerce, Minority Business Development Agency. (2022). *Fact sheet: All minority-owned firms (2018)*. https://www.mbda.gov/economic-impact-all-minority-owned-firms-2018.

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LIFT

Learning & Insights for Forward Traction

An initiative of Texas State University's SCALEUP program with support from the Kauffman Foundation