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# Small Business Strategies for Sustainability Beyond 10 Years

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Gabriel Warren

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University  
2016

Abstract

Small Business Strategies for Sustainability Beyond 10 Years

by

Gabriel Emmanuel Warren

MS, Ashford University, 2012

BS, University of Alabama, 2005

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

May 2016

## Abstract

Small businesses are vital to the health of the United States economy, as they account for approximately 50% of all jobs and 99% of all firms. Historically, there has been a problem with small businesses being able to sustain their operation beyond 10 years. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the business strategies some small business owners used to sustain their company beyond 10 years of operation. The sample consisted of 3 small business owners who have been in operation for 10 or more years in Birmingham, Alabama. The conceptual framework for this study was the general systems theory. The data were collected from semistructured interviews, profit and loss statements, and cash flow statements. Transcript review and member checking were completed to strengthen credibility and trustworthiness. Based on the methodological triangulation of the data sources collected, 3 emergent themes were identified after completing the 5 stages of data analysis: (a) great customer service, (b) building relationships, and (c) finding your passion. The findings from this study may contribute to social change by providing insights and strategies for small business owners in creating and operating a sustainable business. The data from this study may contribute to increased job creation, improved local communities through tax revenues, and decreased unemployment rates throughout the United States.

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## Dedication

This study is dedicated to every small business person who made the decision to go after their dreams and pursue entrepreneurship. My desire is that the results of this study will help to improve your small business and make it more efficient by the findings. I would also like to dedicate this study to my family: my dad, Andrae Warren Sr.; mom, Clementine Warren; sister, Cynthia Dorsey; sister, Bernadette Warren; brother, Andrae Warren Jr.; brother, Joshua Warren, and brother, Joseph Warren. Lastly, I want to dedicate this study to my second mom, Mary Hunter; dad, Ronald Hunter Sr.; sister-in-law, Simone Hunter; sister-in-law, Latesha Wright; brother-in-law, Ronald Hunter Jr.; and brother-in-law, Tuane Greene. Never stop reaching for your dreams, because it is possible with the support and love of those who care for you the most. I love you guys more and more each day.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Malchow-Moller, Schjerning, and Sorensen (2011) have agreed that small businesses create the majority of new jobs in the United States. As of 2010, small businesses employed 59% of the U.S. workforce, or 131 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Some small businesses have failed within the first 5 years (Plehn-Dujowich, 2010). When averaged across all industries, 75% of small businesses would fail within the first 5 years (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2012).

### **Background of the Problem**

A small business in the United States is a company ranging from zero employees up to 1,500 employees (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2012). An example of a small business in the service industry is one that has fewer than \$5 million in receipts; in an industry such as manufacturing, a small business is defined as having fewer than 500 employees (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2012). The focus of my study was small businesses in the service industry with fewer than 50 employees. The number of individuals in the United States who have opened small has more than doubled since 1955 (Campbell, Heriot, Jauregui, & Mitchell, 2012). However, 75% of small business segments in the United States close their doors before reaching 10 years of operation, which negatively impacts the economy (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2012). Some factors that could contribute to small business failures are inadequate planning, lack of strategy, and poor implementation (Phillip, 2011). Risk management and poor decision-making by management are key factors that can lead to increased business failures (Phillip, 2011). Additional research was needed to identify the existing

sustainability strategies of small business owners in the southeastern region of the United States to determine if different strategies are required to sustain a business beyond 10 years (Miles, 2013). Gaining a deeper understanding of business owners in the southeastern United States may help future business leaders make decisions that could aid in the sustainability of their business beyond 10 years of operation. Sustainability is when a business can continue in consecutive years of operation without closing the business (LandLearn NSW, 2010).

### **Problem Statement**

Seventy-five percent of small businesses that operate in the United States fail before reaching 10 years of operation (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2014). Small businesses in the United States account for more than 67% of net new job creation each year (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2012). The number of small business failures is a problem because of the impact failing businesses have on the economy through employment and unemployment rates within the United States (Miles, 2013). The general business problem was that some small business owners lack knowledge of what strategies are necessary to ensure sustainability. The specific business problem was that some small business owners lack strategies to sustain their companies beyond 10 years of operation.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the business strategies of some small business owners used to sustain their company beyond 10 years of operation. The target population consisted of three successful small business owners from Birmingham, Alabama, who had demonstrated business sustainability beyond 10

years. The study may have implications for positive social change by helping small businesses to achieve business sustainability beyond 10 years of operation. The contribution to social change may be to reduce failure rates and increase the sustainability of small businesses, thus increasing jobs, increasing sales revenue, increasing tax revenue, and reducing the unemployment rate.

### **Nature of the Study**

A qualitative methodology was appropriate for the research study because the focus was on exploring, in a behavioral or informational context, the factors that could contribute to small business sustainability. Leedy and Ormrod (2013) defined qualitative research as a research methodology addressing a phenomenon that is difficult or impossible to quantify mathematically or with statistical procedures. The underlying assumption of qualitative research is that, by taking a holistic view of philosophies, events, and procedures based on real-world experiences, the qualitative researcher develops a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon.

A quantitative study was not appropriate for this study because it seeks to gain data that do not allow for feelings or opinions to be expressed and observed (Yin, 2012). Quantitative data do not provide an opportunity for complete understanding of common themes that have emerged through participants sharing the *how* and *why* behind running a successful small business. Mixed-method approach consists of both qualitative and quantitative research designs, enabling the researcher to seek information needed to solve a problem instead of identifying a problem's cause (Sparkes, 2014). Additionally, there

were no variables to examine or compare regarding the chosen research topic of small business sustainability beyond 10 years of operation.

There are multiple approaches to a qualitative research design, which include (a) phenomenology, (b) case study, (c) ethnography, and (d) narrative (Yin, 2012). A phenomenological design was not appropriate because it is used when a researcher studies the individual world-views and lived experiences of many individuals (Yin, 2012). Additionally, the phenomenological design was not appropriate because the researcher uses this method to look at “unique” experiences of the participants in regards to the phenomena being studied. A case study was appropriate for investigating real-life issues and current phenomena (Yin, 2012). An ethnographic design is appropriate when studying the shared beliefs, behaviors, and experiences of a group over time (Yin, 2012). The ethnographic design was not suitable for this study because I was not seeking to look at the cultural influences that related to the topic. Researchers use a narrative design to identify the life stories and experiences narrated chronologically by individuals (Yin, 2012). A narrative design was not the best for this study because I was not seeking to tell the life stories of the businesses that participated in the study.

A case study was appropriate for this research study because it allowed me as the researcher to ask *how* and *why* questions that focused on a set of events over which I had little to no control (Yin, 2012). The use of the case study research design provided an opportunity to gain in-depth information from business owners who have operated a sustainable small business beyond 10 years. Yin (2012) noted descriptive case studies illustrate events and their specific events. I selected a descriptive qualitative case study to

gain an understanding of strategies small business owners use to achieve sustainability beyond 10 years.

### **Research Question**

The central research question for this study was as follows: What are the business strategies of small business owners who have sustained their businesses beyond 10 years?

### **Interview/Survey Questions**

The following were the open-ended interview questions that addressed the research question:

1. What characteristics must a small business owner possess to operate a sustainable business?
2. What strategies have contributed to your ability to sustain your business and become profitable for the past 10 years?
3. What do you believe is the single most important characteristic a business owner must possess to create a sustainable business?
4. What business strategies have you used to run a profitable business?
5. Is there anything else you want to share concerning the sustainability of your small business?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Von Bertalanffy (1950) introduced systems theory during a talk at the University of Chicago in 1937 and in a German journal in 1949. Drack (2009) described a system as components or parts of an interactive system, network, organization, or population.

Soojin, Miso, and Joonhwan (2011) noted that systems interact with their environments

and can increasingly procure new properties, resulting in a process of continuous evolution. Rather than considering an entity according to the properties of its individual parts, systems theory focuses on the positioning of the components and their connection into a whole. Von Bertalanffy used systems theory to explore relationships between multiple components, objects, or events. The primary concept of systems theory is *wholeness* (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Systems theory is the discipline of studying interrelationships rather than individual components and patterns of change (Clemens, 2009).

Systems theory further grounded and complimented this study because small business owners have to use multiple processes and skill sets to create a sustainable and profitable business. By looking at how the individual business owners utilized strategies to sustain their business, I was able to determine themes that aid in the sustainability of small business and how those individual themes assist in the wholeness of small business sustainability. Furthermore, systems theory fit this study because I was able to look at the past and present systems and strategies used by individual sustainable small businesses. Having an understanding of how those systems can be duplicated to address the problem for future and existing small businesses is how systems theory applied to the topic of small business sustainability beyond 10 years.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Business failure:* A business failure is a business having not made a net profit for the previous 2 years and may include business termination (Lussier & Halabi, 2010).

*Entrepreneurship:* Entrepreneurship involves creating a new business, incorporating the assumption of risk, seeking opportunities, and developing an idea from inception to reality (Zahra & Wright, 2011).

*Small business:* A small business is a privately held, independent business that can vary in annual revenue or number of employees. Depending upon the industry, small businesses can range in size from zero to 1,500 employees with annual revenue up to \$23 million. In the manufacturing industry, organizations with fewer than 500 employees are small businesses, whereas, in the service industry, small businesses have less than \$5 million in receipts (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2012).

*Small and medium business enterprises (SMEs):* Small and medium business enterprises are businesses with 500 or fewer employees, depending upon the industry. Small and medium sized companies often meet the U.S. Small Business Administration definition of small businesses and include large organizations that do not meet the definition of a large corporation (Barth, Lin, & Yost, 2011).

*Sustainability:* Sustainability is the ability or capacity for maintenance or for something to sustain itself (LandLearn NSW, 2010). Sustainability in the study is referred to as establishing, growing, and maintaining the business successfully.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

#### **Assumptions**

This study included four assumptions. The first assumption was that a qualitative methodology would be an appropriate methodology to explore the strategies required for new and existing small businesses to become sustainable beyond 10 years. Conducting a

qualitative study, I assumed qualitative or mixed methodology would not accurately provide the best results for the topic. The second assumption was that a case study would be an appropriate design for the study. The assumption behind the use of case study design was that conducting face-to-face interviews with multiple business owners would provide more validity to the results of the research. The case study was used as opposed to a phenomenological approach because it involved researching the lived unique experiences of participants regarding the phenomena that was being studied (Yin, 2014). The third assumption was the sample size of small business owners willing to participate in the study would reflect an appropriate cross-sectional sampling of the population for the purpose of saturation and sufficiency (Kisely & Kendall, 2011). The fourth assumption was that the study participants would provide truthful and comprehensive responses to the interview questions and would not intentionally introduce bias.

### **Limitations**

Some limitations existed in this study, as with all research (Thomas, Nelson, & Silverman, 2011). A qualitative study incorporating participant interviews can be limited by potential participant bias and participants' ability to accurately recollect events from their past performance. Participants may have experienced discomfort in disclosing information about the failure or success of their business and may not precisely recollect their experience conducting business. Another limitation was that this study was not comprehensive to include all types of businesses in different regions of the country. This study took place in Birmingham, Alabama, and did not involve interviewing business

owners in other geographical parts of the country. The factors and characteristics that emerged did not have a defined effective period or lifespan.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are restrictions or boundaries that researchers impose to focus the scope of a study (Thomas et al., 2011). The first delimitation of the study was the use of small business categories as defined by the U.S. Small Business Administration, based upon annual sales or employee population. The research population consisted of businesses that have been in business for at least 10 years. These were delimitations because expanding the research population to include businesses with greater than 50 employees could change the outcome of the study due to there being different factors required to maintain a larger staff such as increased payroll, training of more employees, and higher operating costs. A second was the lack of consideration of businesses that were younger than 10 years of operation. There could be strategies business owners use to remain sustainable for 5 years that could also be used as a stepping stone for companies seeking to stay in business for 10 years or more.

### **Significance of the Study**

#### **Contribution to Business Practice**

The research study had many implications that applied directly to small businesses in the United States. Looking at factors such as job creation and unemployment rates, community involvement, and tax revenue for the local economy, each can have an impact on the economy. Business owners may reduce the likelihood of

their failure rates by focusing on the factors uncovered by the participants in the study that have caused them to sustain their company beyond 10 years.

### **Implications for Social Change**

Successful small businesses have an effect on the economy. Small business owners employ 59% of the U.S. population (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2014) and create approximately 86% of new jobs each year (Neumark, Wall, & Junfu, 2011). Developing a successful business that sustains beyond 10 years may affect communities by employing people, local communities through taxes, and the U.S. economy through decreased unemployment rates. The study involved exploring the strategies small business owners use in the first 10 years of operations that contribute to the sustainability of the business. As a new business owner, one must know what factors may aid in their failure and success in order to plan accordingly and increase their likelihood of success

### **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

The purpose of the literature review is to synthesize and summarize the literature as it relates to a research topic (Rhoades, 2011). An examination of the literature helps scholars and researchers to avoid unintentional duplication of existing research while enhancing professional development and enabling a significant contribution to the existing literature (Rhoades, 2011). Literature reviews enable researchers to contribute to the development of topics that contain further research directions (Seuring & Gold, 2012).

The articles used throughout the literature review and entire doctoral study are listed below. The articles include qualitative and quantitative research to investigate

common themes among research participants. Literature maps determine connections between subjects and highlight gaps in current research by outlining general headings and subheadings (Rahmandoust et al., 2011). The Walden University Library and Google Scholar databases produced valuable information for the literature review. Research databases utilized included ERIC, ProQuest, Business Info Source, and SAGE Journals. The literature gathering process includes the use of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and websites.

The use of multiple sources verifies the credibility of the 178 articles published from 2010 to 2015 addressed in the doctoral study. Of the total of 178 unique sources referenced in the literature review, 162 (91% of the literature review content) are current, peer-reviewed research articles published from 2011 to 2015. There are 26 total articles published prior to 2011. Twelve sources, comprised of 9 citations from other dissertation findings and three government websites, were not peer reviewed. There is one academic book used in the literature review.

Table 1

*Literature Review Source Content*

Literature Review Content	Total #	# within 5-year range (2012 – 2016)	% Total peer-reviewed within 5-year range (2012-2016)
Peer-reviewed Journals	165	149	90.3%
Books	1	1	100%
Non-peer reviewed Journals	12	12	100%
Older Articles	0	0	0
Total	178	162	91.0%

The research question and problem statement define the theme of the literature review (Rahmandoust et al., 2011). The research question for this study was this: What are the business strategies of successful small business owners who have sustained businesses beyond 10 years?

**Overview**

Researchers have used differing definitions of small business failure, resulting in inconsistent findings and inaccurate recommended solutions (Smith, Drumwright, & Gentile, 2010). Craig, Jackson, and Thompson (2009) and Vera and Onji (2010) found the U.S. Small Business Administration listed multiple definitions for small businesses. In several industries, a small business could have annual revenue of \$23 million (Vera & Onji, 2010). In addition to annual income, the small business category ranges from one employee to 1,500 employees (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2012).

Small business start-ups have outpaced the number of small business closures each year since 1992; however, the number of small business closures has often been close to the start-up figures (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2012). According to Plehn-Dujowich (2010), governments including Germany, Japan, Switzerland, and the United States have encouraged the creation of small businesses. President Eisenhower initiated U.S. government support for small businesses in 1953 by signing the Small Business Act (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2012). Eisenhower established the U.S. Small Business Administration to support the growth of small businesses and to provide training, education programs, and loans to aspiring U.S. entrepreneurs (Welbourne & Pardo-del-Val, 2009).

Subsequent to Eisenhower's establishment of the U.S. Small Business Administration in 1958, Congress enacted the Small Business Investment Act. The Act was created to provide economic stimulus, expand the support of small businesses, and encourage long-term business loans and private equity investment to support the expansion, growth, and modernization of small businesses (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2012).

Since 1976, the Office of Advocacy has provided an independent voice for small businesses and supported the concerns and views of small businesses before all branches and agencies of the U.S. government, courts, and state governments (Schweikart, 2011). Schweikart and Doti (2010) discovered the establishment of the U.S. Small Business Administration and enactment of subsequent legislation did not alter the high failure rate of small businesses. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the

strategies required for new businesses to sustain operating beyond the first 10 years in business.

In 2011, 99.7% of the 28 million businesses in the United States were small businesses (Yallapragada & Bhuiyan, 2011). Small businesses have been critical contributors to the U.S. economy (Rolfe, 2011). Small business owners comprised 97.5% of U.S. exporters, paid approximately 51% of U.S. payrolls, and generated more than 65% of new jobs from 1990 to 2010 (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2011). Small business has served a number of crucial roles in the U.S. economy, including (a) providing income for unemployed and underemployed; (b) employing 66% of minorities; (c) employing 70% of older individuals; (d) employing disabled workers; (e) employing rural workers; (f) filling underserved niches; (g) providing products and services in which large corporations cannot benefit from economies of scale; (h) serving as the primary source of new creative and innovative concepts, products, and services; (i) providing support services to larger corporations; and (j) providing 16.5 times as many patents per employees as large companies (Yallapragada & Bhuiyan, 2011). In 2011, women-owned businesses constituted approximately 40% of small businesses, and 83% of women-owned businesses were in the service and retail sectors (Yallapragada & Bhuiyan, 2011).

Small business failures have been a problem in the United States for 400 years (Schweikart & Doti, 2010). Through the end of the 20th century, the number of small business starts consistently outpaced small business closures (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2011). During the first decade of the 21st century, the average number of small business starts was similar to the number of small business failures (Politis &

Gabrielsson, 2009). According to Yallapragada and Bhuiyan (2011), approximately 34% of new businesses failed within the first 2 years. When averaged across all industries, about 75% of new business failure occurred within the first 5 years, which could have a devastating effect on the U.S. economy (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2011). No organizations tracked small business failure rates before the 1950s. The small business failure rates have been consistent from 1950 through 2010, but the number of failed businesses has more than doubled since 1955 due to the continuously increasing number of businesses (Campbell et al., 2012).

Reijonen and Komppula (2010) noted that small business success and failure are subjective concepts. Business peers, bankers, and industry experts may consider entrepreneurs who regard themselves as successful to be failures (Reijonen & Komppula, 2010). Perceptions of small business failure are equally ambiguous. Reasons for small business failure include (a) bankruptcy, (b) involuntary termination forced by creditors, (c) voluntary termination by the owner, (d) elective discontinuance, and (e) death of the owner or entrepreneur (Reijonen & Komppula, 2010).

Lussier and Sonfield (2010) identified inconsistencies in research statistics about business failure due to limitations in data collection methods. The U.S. government has not collected comprehensive data about small business closures (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2011). Additionally, the government has not collected data for nonbankruptcy small business terminations (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2011). Valdiserri and Wilson (2010) noted the failure rate of new small businesses in the first 3 years was approximately 90%. There has been a lack of general agreement on the

definition of small business failure; the fact remains that business failure affects families, communities, and the economy.

Existing small business research has been primarily centered on small business success (Hamrouni & Akkari, 2012). There has been limited research on the topic of small business failure. Tan, Fischer, Mitchell, and Phan (2009) reported failure was the focus of only 6% of small business research. Small business is central to new job creation because small businesses grow faster than large corporations grow (Malchow-Moller et al., 2011).

Lussier conducted quantitative research of small businesses to determine the variables that affect the success or failure of new businesses (Lussier & Halabi, 2010; Lussier & Sonfield, 2010). After testing the predictability model in the United States and other countries between 1995 and 2010, Lussier (1995) and Lussier and Halabi (2010) were able to predict the failure of business about 50% of the time. Several variables were consistent predictors of failure across multiple studies; however, the priority and ranking of the variables were not consistent between studies. Lussier and Halabi noted that qualitative research is appropriate to examine small business failures.

### **Small Business Success and Failure**

Small businesses have a significantly higher failure rate than larger corporations (Philip, 2011). Schweikart and Doti (2010) stated how small business failures have been a problem in the United States for the past 400 years. The U.S. Small Business Administration's definition of small business classifies businesses by industry, with some industries defined by the number of employees and other industries defined by annual

sales (Salas-Fumas & Sanchez-Asin, 2011). Yallapragada and Bhuiyan (2011) defined small business failure in terms of (a) bankruptcy, (b) involuntary termination with a loss to creditors, (c) voluntary termination, (d) failure as an opportunity cost, (e) partnership dispute, (f) legal dispute, (g) personal limitations of owner, (h) elective discontinuance, (i) merger with or acquisition by another firm, and (j) death of the small business owner.

According to the U.S. Small Business Administration 2012, Census Bureau data indicated approximately 50% of new businesses survived between 2 and 5 years.

Additionally, U.S. Small Business Administration data indicated that, when averaged across all industries, approximately 75% of new businesses failed within the first 5 years (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2011). During the economic recession from 2007 to 2009, businesses with fewer than 50 employees experienced a higher rate of job loss and higher failure rates than small and large businesses with more than 50 employees (Malchow-Moller et al., 2011). In 2009, as the economic recession ended, business closures exceeded new business starts by about 20% for the first time in recorded U.S. history (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2011). Many researchers have looked at small business failure rates, and the findings have varied. One common theme agreed upon by previous scholars who have researched this topic is that the failure rate is high and needs to be further addressed. The differing industries and types of businesses will require different strategies for sustainability, necessitating continued study beyond the scope of this study.

There are a few factors to consider when thinking about the success of a small business. The increase of self-employment contributes to the overall determination of

small business success (Rolfe, 2011). Owners of insolvent small businesses often invest personal assets, borrow from friends and relatives, and reduce their compensation to remain in business (Campbell et al., 2012). Small business owners faced with financial challenges often consider the business successful when it is surviving, but failure is imminent (Campbell et al., 2012).

When averaged across all industries, about 75% of new business failure occurred within the first 5 years, which could have a devastating effect on the U.S. economy (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2011). No organizations tracked small business failure rates before the 1950s. Additionally, the government has not collected data for nonbankruptcy small business terminations (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2011). During the economic recession from 2007 to 2009, businesses with fewer than 50 employees experienced a higher rate of job loss and higher failure rates than small and large businesses with more than 50 employees (Malchow-Moller et al., 2011). In 2009, as the economic recession ended, business closures exceeded new business starts by about 20% for the first time in recorded U.S. history (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2011).

### **Small Business Effects on the Economy**

The contribution of entrepreneurship to the U.S. economy dates back to the 1700s (Rolfe, 2011). In 2013, the estimated total number of small businesses in the United States was 23 million, which accounted for 54% of all U.S. sales regarding gross domestic product (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2014). Small business also accounted for more than 86% of new jobs in the United States (Neumark et al., 2011).

Some of the early entrepreneurs such as Henry Ford, J.C. Penny, and H.J. Heinz failed before later succeeding (Schweikart & Doti, 2010). Entrepreneurs such as Sam Walton, Bill Gates, and Steve Jobs experienced various levels of failure before arriving at the degree of success for which they are most known. The number of small businesses has increased by 49% since 1982, which is a result of corporate American companies downsizing (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2014).

Small business is central to new job creation because small businesses grow faster than large corporations grow (Malchow-Moller et al., 2011). The U.S. Small Business Administration was founded in 1953, with a mission to aid, assist, support, and protect American small businesses through business counseling, contracts, education, loans, and loan guarantees (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2011). President Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed a variety of programs designed to accelerate economic recovery, reform banking, generate jobs, and support small business (Sutton, 2012). Franchising grew by 900% in the 1950s, which included car dealerships, hotels, restaurants, and other consumer sectors (Wadsworth & Cox, 2011). Each of these industries employed multiple individuals in their communities and resulted in boosting the economy through job growth and consumers spending money to utilize these services. Franchising expanded throughout the 20th century and expanded rapidly in the 1970s, accounting for more than 10% of the U.S. gross national product in 1979 (McCuddy, Eser, & Pinar, 2011).

In 1981, Colorado Governor Richard Lamm encouraged politicians to support the growing small business phenomenon (Groves, Vance, & Choi, 2011). According to Schweikart and Doti (2010), in the 1980s, employers created 20 million new jobs in the

United States, with more than 60% created by small business owners. Loscocco and Bird (2012) reported that employers created 12 million new jobs from 1980 to 1987 while larger businesses eliminated 3 million positions. Most of the new jobs resulted from the rapid expansion of small business in the fast food, computer, fiber optics, cellular phone, and cable television industries. Jasra, Khan, Hunjra, Rechman, and Azam (2011) noted that small businesses induce economic growth and are critical to the U.S. economy. Small businesses are not only a key source of employment, but they also provide significant revenues to taxing bodies (local, state, federal), support local nonprofit groups, and are a source of innovation (Prasad, Tata, & Guo, 2012). Small businesses have accounted for a high percentage of job creation, economic growth, and innovation through competitive advantage (Ngozi, 2012).

### **External Support System**

Researchers agree that external support systems have positive effects on small business entrepreneurs and small business sustainability at all levels (Augusto, Eduardo, & Jorge, 2012; Fielden & Hunt 2011; Patel, Fiet, & Sohl, 2011; Soriano & Castrogiovanni, 2012; Wang & Shapira, 2012). External expertise, such as accountants or legal advice, is noted as a capability that does not currently exist within the organization but is available elsewhere (Viljamaa, 2011). It is important for a small business owner to recognize when the complex nature of the organization extends beyond their capability, and an external relevant expertise is needed (Keating, Geiger, & McLoughlin, 2013). Chrisman, McMullan, Ring, and Holt, (2012), stated that limitations exist for all business owners, despite education, knowledge, or experience; hence the

need to tap into complementary external assistance when evaluating new ideas or strategies. Chrisman et al. (2012) concluded that there is a positive, curvilinear relationship between small business survival and the time spent in venture start-up groundwork under the guidance of an outside expert.

Some researchers suggest that trust plays a fundamental role in the entrepreneur's decision of whom to confide in when external expertise is required (Bergh, Thorgren, & Wincent, 2011; Welter, 2012). Therefore, if a small business owner does not trust others who have expertise in a skill they do not possess; it could have an impact on the business. The sources of external expertise range from informal advice provided by friends and acquaintances to professional assistance programs (consultants, lawyers, accountants and enterprise support officers) provided by governments, communities, and private organizations (Viljamaa, 2011).

### **Networking Skills**

Networking is a valuable tool for business and relationship development (Cote, 2012). Networking comes in many forms ranging from informal networking from friends and family members to formal networking through community groups, religious organization, and government groups (de Klerk, & Saayman, 2012). Understanding how to build a customer base and a value chain network is critical for a small business to benefit from the start-up effort (Cote, 2012). Struggling entrepreneurs find using networking to secure needed resources and learning is an effective option to support sustainability (Kazakov, 2012). There are operational challenges of running a small business dictate that substantially depends on networking for resources that are typically

not available internally (Gronum, Verryne, & Kastle, 2012). Toson (2012) expresses the need for small business owners to develop strong networking skills as a way to increase their chances of sustainability. There is a positive correlation between strategic small business entrepreneur, external networking or association, and business sustainability (Sullivan & Marvel, 2011). As a business owner, there must be a strategy created for the development of networking skills and the ability to build mutually beneficial relationships.

Networking can go beyond the face-to-face encounters that small business owners conduct each day. Social media has given business owners the ability to broaden their networking footprint beyond the geographical location where they have their office building. Some examples of using social media to network can be done through websites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Google+. Joining industry specific groups and writing a personal blog regarding your business can increase the networking footprint of the small business owner (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014).

### **Management Education and Experience**

Small business owners can impact the performance of the business in a positive or negative way by the level of skill and expertise they possess (Chinomona, 2013).

Developing proper managerial skills can provide a competitive advantage for a small business owner (Alasadi, & Al Sabbagh, 2015). Failure is negatively reputed in many business organizations, and can be linked to a lack of knowledge or discipline to the business operations (Heinze, 2013). Knowledge of small business failure derives from limited resources, mentors, or formal business education (Ucbasaran, Sheperd, Lockett,

& Lyon, 2012). Heinze (2013) supported the idea that failure is defined in opposition to success. According to McFarland & McConnell (2012), small business owners that lack management and business skills fail at a higher rate than small business owners with strengths in these areas. Some business owners gain their education through the experiences of failures that they go through, and can learn from and make adjustments to improve their future business decisions (Ucbasaran et al., 2012).

Sullivan and Marvel, (2011), acknowledge the significance of knowledge as the primary resource for small business success. Lack of relevant knowledge results in inadequacies referred to as incompetence, inefficiency, and one of the leading causes of small business failure (Sullivan & Marvel, 2011). Other researchers also noted that entrepreneurial knowledge is an important characteristic of the business owner, especially in early venture development (Knockaert, Ucbasaran, Wright, & Clarysse, 2011; Larraneta, Zahra, & Gonzalez, 2012). Through a process called clustering, business owners look to external companies within the same industry that encourages knowledge sharing and collaboration among members of the cluster (Larraneta et al., 2012). An example of companies such as legal services, marketing services, and sales consultants can be a member of the cluster of businesses that provide external expertise in the areas the small business owner is lacking (Larraneta et al., 2012). A lack of relevant knowledge can result in inadequacies referred to as incompetence and inefficiency, being one of the main causes of small business failure (Sullivan & Marvel, 2011). One method to reduce small business failure could be to assist small business owners in the development of leadership skills (Phipps, 2012). Teck-Hong and Yong-Kean (2012), and van Gelderen et

al. (2011) found that business owners with a high level of education and who promoted continuing education throughout their company had a lower risk of failure.

Well-developed and adaptable leadership skills are essential to achieving incremental success and avoid business failure, regardless of the size or the age of the business (Buchan, 2011; McGrath, 2011). Fassin, Rossem, and Buelens (2011) reviewed managers' views of business ethics and corporate social responsibility and noted that small business managers can shape corporate culture and enact values other than profit. The article indicated that strong managerial leadership within organizations is important, as is integrating business ethics and social responsibility in the decision-making process.

Another way to develop skills and education can be from volunteer opportunities that allow the small business owner to expand their skills (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). Taking positions as a board member or being a part of a committee for a local community organization can assist in the development of managerial skills needed to keep a business successful. Providing pro bono services can be a way to interact with other industries and to strengthen your network with people who may not need your services directly (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). Small business owners can sign up for a mentorship program to further develop their skills. Finding a mentorship program can be identified by going through government organizations such as SCORE, the chamber of commerce, or local nonprofit organizations who seek to help small businesses succeed. Virtual mentoring is available to small business owners through joining groups on sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook. Being a part of a group allows the small business owner to learn and share with other like-minded individuals to build knowledge among each other.

## **Systems Theory**

Dawidowicz (2012) explained that systems thinking involved multiple analyzes of several characteristics of the system, such as, adjoining and interacting systems in the environment, the characteristics involved, and the actions that will occur because of the decisions taken. The idea that organisms, as well as human organizations and societies, are open systems described the concept of systems theory evolved by the German biologists von Bertalanffy (Stacey, 2011). General Systems is that the phenomena of life are present in organisms to uncover the law and order of various systems ('Stell' Kefalas, 2011). Luhmann based his systems theory on the principle of self-referential and self-governing systems (van Leir & Hardjono, 2011). Soojin, Miso, and Joonhwan (2011) noted systems interact with their environments and can increasingly procure new properties, resulting in a process of continuous evolution. Rather than considering an entity according to the properties of its individual parts, systems theory focuses on the positioning of the components and their connection into a whole.

Checkland indicates that systems theory lacks substantive concepts and does not effectively support systems practices (Yan & Yan, 2010). Caldwell (2012) argued that there was a possibility of re-conceptualizing Senge's legacy from a practice theory perspective as a partial fusion of systems thinking and learning theories. Partial fusion lead to the concept of organizational learning as a process of systems-based organizational change According to Buckle Henning and Chen (2012), more is needed to comprehend systems thinking. Fox (2011) described the application of systems theory as

*systems analysis*. One of the mechanisms of systems analysis is *systems thinking* (Diez-Roux, 2011).

Tennyson and Sisk (2011) found systems thinking differs from traditional forms of analysis, which are linear and usually focus on breaking a problem into components and studying each part individually. Most organizational problems interrelate in ways that challenge classical causation (Tennyson & Sisk, 2011). The focus of systems thinking is on the relationship between parts and it provides a more accurate picture of the business phenomenon so business owners could work with a system's natural forces to achieve the desired outcome. According to Fox (2011), systems thinking provided management with a valuable tool by expanding the view of how different parts of the system interact and affect other parts of the system. Jonassen (2011) described systems thinking as an approach to developing an understanding of interactions between components and the underlying patterns of behavior. The combination of systems theory and systems thinking could provide an explanatory and predictive value to identify potential problems or conflicts within an organization (von Bertalanffy, 1972). In contrast, to the entire system, components of a system may react differently when viewed individually (Porra & Hirschheim, 2007).

Systems thinking research strategy has been used to focus on problems from an expansive context that includes structures, patterns, variables, and events rather than concentrating on the events in isolation (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Von Bertalanffy (1950) noted that managers make numerous decisions simultaneously within the divisions or departments of an organization. Individually, decisions may appear to benefit the

organization; however, mutual interaction could sabotage the intended outcome and produce unintended results (von Bertalanffy, 2009). The implementation of systems theory could result in decision making that is more effective.

Lussier (1995) recognized that various systems exist within new businesses. Lussier and Halabi (2010) studied the new business failure prediction model in three countries. The systems feedback loops differed for new businesses in each of the three countries as a result of different regulations and business methods within each country. The results of the study indicated the relationship between the new business failure prediction factors was not consistent in the three countries and failed to predict the success or failure of new businesses (Lussier & Halabi, 2010).

Fractal organization theory, inspired by systems theory, involves shared values in business to create solutions toward continuous improvement (Raye, 2012). Many small business owners find it difficult to balance business operations and manage the financial reports because of limited education-based resources (Kirsten, 2013). Fractal organizational structure's key mechanism for the development of culture, is characterized by self-similarity (Bodunkova & Chernaya, 2012). Past researchers have not come to a single root cause of low business survival rates.

### **Capital and Financial Management**

A common characteristic among small businesses is that they lack proper funding. Kozan and Akdeniz (2014) outlined that small businesses rely heavily on personal or family resources. As a result, the business tends to be persistently in need of money. Similar to living organisms and self-reliance, small businesses must employ the proper

financial management procedures to maintain their business survival (Moeller & Valentinov, 2012). Yallapragada and Bhuiyan (2011) studied small business failure and found that when businesses fail, often it is because of the lack of adequate capital. As a result of the lack of adequate capital, the small businesses may find it difficult to expand growth opportunities that are available in their markets (Yallapragada & Bhuiyan, 2011). Arthur and Hisrich (2011) described many barriers to success for new ventures such as access to capital and effective management.

A small business owner should create a strong financial strategy when seeking to grow and develop a sustainable business (Navis & Glynn, 2011). If seeking outside funding, a small business must seek ways to distinguish themselves from other businesses to persuade others to give funding (Navis & Glynn, 2011). Common ways that small businesses raise capital include acquiring funding from methods such as bootstrapping, financial institutions, angel investors, and venture capitalist. Jones and Jayawarna (2010) described two forms of bootstrapping: raising capital without using banks or equity and gaining resources without the need for capital. Some of the most common ways of bootstrapping includes using credit cards, savings accounts, or retirement accounts to fund the initial operation of the business. If bootstrapping is not a viable option for small business owners, because they do not have personal funds available, they may look at financial institutions as a resource to raise capital.

Financial institutions include businesses such as banks, credit unions, or direct loan companies that specialize in lending money to individuals and businesses. Small business owners try to leverage their relationships with their existing banks to gain

funding from financial institutions through loans (Cole, 2013). Having relationships with multiple financial institutions can be a point of leverage for small business owners seeking to raise money from multiple sources (Cole, 2013). Challenges in the creditworthiness of the small business owner can provide a barrier to raising capital in the startup phase of the business. Angel investors are an option for small business owners seeking to gain funding sources but have a barrier of creditworthiness.

Angel investors can be vital to small businesses during the startup phase of the business. Moore (2011) recommended understanding the importance of identifying investors who can provide long-term funds and noted that people are knowledgeable about the business and not so knowledgeable about potential investors. Small businesses that do not succeed at raising capital from angel investors are unsuccessful due to poor alignment of their pitch and the way angel investors make their business decisions about investing (Moore, 2011). Venture capital is another way to raise money for the startup of a small business.

Venture capital is the most aggressive form of business funding for entrepreneurs. Wealthy family foundations, such as the Ford Foundation, funded the early days of private equity investing in the United States (James, 2010). Investors seeking to provide funding through venture capital resources date back to World War II. Investing using venture capital involves companies providing equity capital for funding startup or growth firms with the goal of maximizing the financial return. The use of a venture capital strategy requires the small business owner to identify an issue and provide solutions that

investors are willing to give financial backing. The use of venture capital as a way to raise capital for a business can be a difficult task for a small business owner.

### **Employee Development**

Employee development can be vital to the success of a business (Shuck & Herd, 2012; Bryant & Allen, 2013). A business owner has the responsibility of making sure a culture of employee training and development is established throughout the business (Gilbreath, 2012; Braun, Avital, & Martz, 2012). Business owners and managers need to look for ways to develop employees through giving them challenging projects that allow their skills and competencies to grow (Beattie, Kim, Hagen, Egan, Ellinger, & Hamlin, 2014; Sawa & Swift, 2013). If the development of employees is not a focus of the owners, the business runs the risk of being able to retain good employees that could help the business succeed. Employee career development opportunities and coaching can be one of the most important factors in retaining employees in these organizations (Kim, Egan, Kim, & Kim, 2013). In a small business setting, owners can engage more with employees and offer specialized training in areas that are specific to the business they operate in, which can increase the amount of time it takes to develop employees through training in a larger organization (Chinomona, 2013).

Unlike larger organizations that can spend money hiring corporate training companies to come in and train the staff on a specific skill, small business owners use informal skills development methods through direct exposure and on the job experiences (Chinomona, 2013). The development of employees should be an investment small business owners should not hesitate to make. Employee development can be linked to

increased productivity and profitability (Chinomona, 2013). It is also important for the small business owner to invest in their skill development as a way to be able to train their employees through on the job training.

Having the right leadership style as a small business owner can have a positive impact on the development of the employees who work for the business (Choudhary, Akhtar, & Zaheer, 2013; Sarti, 2014). There are two leadership styles Sarti (2014) notes that help keep employees motivated in the roles. The first leadership style is named participative leadership, which encourages equal contribution and opinions from all team members of the business in the strategic planning aspects of the business (Sarti, 2014). In a small business context, the owner who possesses this style can reduce the amount of stress they place on themselves, because of the involvement of all members of the team. A second leadership style Sarti (2014) noted is instrumental leadership, which focuses more on setting expectations, establishing procedures, and delegating tasks to different members of the team. As a small business owner, instrumental leadership can provide more clarity for the employees and the owner, which could aid in increased employee motivation and job satisfaction (Sarti, 2014). If employees are more satisfied and feel as if they are part of the decision-making process for the business, they are more willing to be trained and developed on skills they lack (Sarti, 2014).

In small businesses, there are some barriers to employee development that arise when factors such as lack of financial resources or availability of staff (Bandura, & Lyons, 2015). If a business has a limited number of employees, sending one or two employees away for an extended period for training is costly and may hinder

productivity. A small business can choose to utilize computer aided training as a way to develop employees without having them attend external training seminars (Bandura & Lyons, 2015). Another barrier for small businesses is having the owner personally train and mentor new employees on their roles. As the small business grows, the owner of the small business will be less available to give personalized mentoring and training to every new employee hired (Bandura & Lyons, 2015; Smothers, 2011). If the training needs vary across the team, a small business owner will not be able to train everyone at the same time; this barrier could decrease overall productivity of the business until each employee is trained (Vroom, 2013).

The third barrier to employee development is the financial requirement of hiring an external consultant or training company to come in and train new employees (Bandura & Lyons, 2015). For a small business, the financial commitment required to retain a training company to assist with employee development can be expensive and reduce profitability. The fourth barrier to employee development is the lack of knowledge or expertise of the small business owner in the area of need that the employee may have (Bandura & Lyons, 2015). If the owner of the business needs training in a specific area such as human resources or computer skills, they are less likely to be able to train new employees on these skills. To be a successful small business owner, there must be a balance of understanding how to train properly new and existing employees without putting a strain on the productivity of the business (Bandura & Lyons, 2015).

## **Operational Processes**

Dunn and Liang (2011); Ivanov (2011); and van Gelderen, Thurik, and Patel (2011) theorized that 95% of small business failure is attributable to lack of business planning. Ennis and Tucci (2011) provided insight into how the lack of internal auditing systems by entrepreneurs is a cause for small business failure. Auditing that focuses on the economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of a business can enhance the entrepreneur as well as the business (Ennis and Tucci, 2011). Small business failure can be traced back to a lack of the owner successfully creating business processes and planning (Christofi, Nunes, Chao Peng, & Lin, 2013; Cragg, Mills, & Suraweera, 2013). Having a strategic plan or business plan that is inclusive of a succession plan is an important aspect of the survival of a business. If a small business does not have a succession plan in their long-term growth strategy, it can increase their risk of failure by not getting external support. The perceived higher risk is large because should something happen to the entrepreneur, business survival is limited as successors will not have the intended business destination (Lam, 2011).

Small business operations range from sales processes, marketing, and the recruiting and training of new employees. Marketing can be an area where small businesses lack the operational structure that can lead to greater success. Bakeman and Hanson, (2012) mentioned that small businesses lack marketing strategies that involve social media integration. Small businesses cannot compete with larger organizations through conducting large media campaigns such as radio or television (Winterberg, 2013). Social media can be a way to equal the marketing playing field because

advertising through social media is free or inexpensive for any size business (Eisenberg, Johnson, & Pieterston, 2015). Vernuccio (2014) noted that social media is an overlooked tool that can create business leads, an impactful company brand, and reduce traditional marketing costs. Naylor, Lamberton, and West (2012) provided statistical evidence that stated by 2011, approximately 83% of Fortune 500 companies were using some form of social media to connect with consumers.

### **Geographical Location**

Cardon, Stevens, and Potter (2011) sought to identify the causes of entrepreneurial failure by reviewing reports from 1999 to 2001 from seven major U.S. newspapers, which provided 389 accounts of failure. They found that the cause of entrepreneurial failure depended on the geographical area where it occurred (Cardon et al., 2011). If a small business owner is seeking to create a business, they must engage in conducting research about the types of businesses that are currently operating in the geographical location that they desire to start their business (Robinson, 2011).

Subscribing to local magazines, talking to existing business owners, and visiting the businesses in the area will provide important data on if there is enough room for a new business to enter the marketplace in that geographic location (Robinson, 2011).

Berg (2014) argued that location of business does not solely determine success or failure of the business. Business owners occasionally make the assumption that because there are a limited number of businesses in a specific area, then that location must not be a great place to put a business. Berg noted that business owners who use this approach do not take all the necessary time required to do research and see if placing a business in a

specific location will yield to be profitable. If a small business decides not to do business in a specific location based on if other businesses are present, they could be missing out on untapped business opportunities (Berg, 2014).

Additionally, research shows that the location of a business is sometimes discovered by the owner when they are doing activities not related to their business (Berg, 2014). If a business owner is riding through a new city, enjoying time away from their business, or spending time with family members, a location of a new business or expansion of the existing business could attract the owner. Small business owners occasionally may use a model of imitation when deciding on a location of their business (Berg, 2014). Imitation happens when a business owner decides to place their business in a location where there are other businesses in the same location, with the assumption that the location will yield profitable for the new business (Berg, 2014). Governmental influence can aid in the decision of a small business to start a business in a specific geographical location. Berg (2014) noted that tax incentives offered by the local government in his research area influenced the business owner to place their business in the location. As a small business owner, gaining tax advantages can aid in the success and sustainability of a small business in comparison to a small business that is not receiving the same tax incentives.

### **Transition and Summary**

The existing body of literature on small business sustainability is both diverse and conflicting. In Section 1, the literature led to findings that revealed the need for small business owners in the U.S. to identify strategies to improve their business sustainability

beyond 10 years. The review of literature included articles relevant to the topic, including descriptions of common themes that have aided businesses in reducing failure rates.

Section 2 contains a detailed description of the research methodology and design, population and sampling, data collection instruments, and techniques used in the study. The chapter includes a detailed dialogue on data collection and organization techniques, data analysis techniques, reliability, and validity

Section 3 includes the results of the study, a detailed commentary of the evidence, and ties to the conceptual framework as they relate to the research question and support the study conclusions. Section 3 ends with a discussion about implications for social change, researcher recommendations, and researcher reflections.

## Section 2: The Project

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the business strategies of successful small business owners who have sustained their business beyond 10 years of operation. The target population consisted of three successful small business owners located in Birmingham, Alabama, who had demonstrated business sustainability beyond 10 years. The study may have implications for positive social change by helping small businesses achieve business sustainability beyond 10 years of operation. The contribution to social change will be to reduce failure rates and increase the sustainability of small businesses, thus increasing jobs, increasing sales revenue, increasing tax revenue, and reducing the unemployment rate.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I was the primary instrument for data collection in the research process by conducting semistructured interviews with each of the study participants face-to-face. My relationship with the topic of small business sustainability derives from me being an emerging small business owner since 2007. I have experienced the various obstacles that cause businesses to fail before the 10 years of operation benchmark, and I was seeking to understand what methods I could use that could increase my likelihood, as well as that of other individuals, of sustainability beyond 10 years. Furthermore, I have other colleagues and acquaintances that have started small businesses and are seeking ways to sustain their businesses.

Each participant in the study needed to receive respect, time, and opportunity to decide to enter a study or not to participate (Department of Health, Education, & Welfare, 1979). Each participant in the study did so voluntarily. I gave prospective participants the information they needed to determine whether they desired to enter into the research study on the consent forms. Each person was treated in an ethical manner, not only by me respecting their decisions and protecting them from harm, but also by making efforts to secure their well-being (Department of Health, Education, & Welfare, 1979). I was and will be the only person with identifiable information from the participants such as their name and organization information (Department of Health, Education, & Welfare, 1979). By keeping identifiable information secure, through following the Belmont protocol, I aimed to provide trustworthiness to the participants, thereby maximizing the benefits of participating in the study and minimize potential perceptions of harm of those who participated (Department of Health, Education, & Welfare, 1979).

During the research process, I kept a journal to help manage, determine, and reduce any potential bias that could affect the research data collection and data analysis (Izuma & Adolphs, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Tufford and Newman (2012) recommended implementing a journaling process to ensure exclusion of personal bias, morals, or beliefs when conducting qualitative research. I made sure to ask open-ended questions and not questions that led the interviewee in any particular direction. Each interview was semistructured with the intent of allowing the interviewee an opportunity to share as much information about the questions asked without being restricted.

Conducting interviews with participants worked well with this study because it allowed participants to share in-depth information pertaining to their experiences and viewpoint on a particular topic (Rowley, 2012). One central research question along with several semistructured, open-ended interview questions guided the research (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013). Qualitative researchers have the freedom to choose their research method, the way they conduct their interviews, and the techniques they use to analyze the data (Bansal & Corley, 2012). As opposed to doing an empirical analysis of numbers through a survey, conducting interviews provides an opportunity to see nonverbal communication as the participants answer each question. I was responsible for transcribing each interview, analyzing the data collected, and compiling the results. An interview protocol was established (Appendix A) to ensure that, in my role as the research instrument, I followed the same protocol with each participant. By me following the steps in the interview protocol, it helped me to make sure I did not skip or miss any important parts in the interview process. Qualitative researchers rely on interview protocols as a way to achieve commonality and add to the consistency and reliability of the research (Foley & O'Conner, 2013).

### **Participants**

The study included a purposive sample of three participants who were small business owners who had been in operation beyond 10 years. Purposeful sampling methods target a population that meets certain criteria established by the researcher to gain a sample of participants in the phenomenon (Suri, 2011). All participants must have had (a) been in business in Birmingham, Alabama, for at least 10 years or more; (b) been

at least 18 years old in age; and (c) had fewer than 50 employees. In purposeful sampling, researchers use their judgment to select participants based on the study criteria (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The participants of the study received an invitation to participate presented in an initial e-mail message. There was also a follow-up call to explain the research and ask for participation. The participants who agreed to participate in the study received an informed consent form presented in a subsequent e-mail and asked to reply to the e-mail by indicating their consent to participate. The participants each were interviewed at their office or mutually agreed upon location for a face-to-face interview. The participants' office or mutually agreed upon location was used to help build trust with each business owner. Trust is a key component in making sure the participants is able to complete a successful interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The strategy used for getting participants consisted of visiting the local Chamber of Commerce to get a list of small businesses in the Birmingham, Alabama area. Tirgari (2012) recommended that when a researcher interviews one participant, the researcher should ask the participant if he or she can recommend other candidates whom he or she feels will be willing to participate, resulting in purposive sampling.

After completing the interviews, I transcribed the digital recording of each interview into a Microsoft Word document. The study did not involve collecting any personal identification information from the study participants. I e-mailed the complete transcribed interview to each of the participants for their review. After receiving responses from the participants, I made the requested corrections, if needed, to the data and uploaded the transcribed participant interviews into the NVivo 10 software program.

After developing the initial codes, I performed axial coding and theoretical coding to identify emergent themes and relationships before reassembling the data around the central theme.

### **Research Method and Design**

There are three choices of research methods: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Ostlund, Kidd, Wengstrom, & Rowa-Dewar, 2011). This study involved investigating a phenomenon and presenting data through the lived experiences of the participants. Exploring the different aspects of individuals' perspectives helped to determine how individuals interact with their environment. The research method for this study was qualitative, with an aim to gain an understanding of the perspectives of small business owners who have survived beyond 10 years of successful operation.

### **Method**

A qualitative research method was the most valuable research method for this research, in order to explore the in-depth experiences of the participants (Davis, 2013; Moutakas, 1994). Qualitative methods, unlike quantitative and mixed methods, allowed me to explore the lived experiences of small business owners in greater depth, through the use of interviews, to understand the phenomenon of how to build a sustainable business beyond 10 years of operation. Qualitative methods permit researchers to ask questions of the participants who have lived experiences pertaining to what, where, and how the phenomenon under study affects them (Barratt, Choi, & Li, 2011). Qualitative research methods are used to gather results that can apply to other contexts without inferences, which allows the researcher's results to apply to other types of the

phenomenon (Hays & Woods, 2011).

Quantitative research involves testing and verifying an already comprehended hypothesis while qualitative research involves the understanding of lived experiences of a particular phenomenon (Borrego, Douglas, & Amelink, 2011). Quantitative methods require the use of numerical data and statistical analysis to examine correlations between two variables, independent and dependent, which was not the purpose of this research project (Barratt et al., 2011). The use of a quantitative method quantifies the results and highlights problems based on the data provided; however, it cannot offer the researcher an understanding of detailed articulation of personal experiences (Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013).

Mixed-method research approaches focus on the exploration of problems and solutions instead of the understanding the cause of problems (Feilzer, 2010). Mixed methods include a quantitative component. The purpose of the research study was to explore the business strategies of successful small business owners who have sustained businesses beyond 10 years. Mixed-method approaches consist of the researcher using a combination of deductive and inductive methods (Bansal & Corely, 2012). The objective of this study was not to test a theory or hypothesis but to gain a greater understanding of the factors small business owners used to aid in the survival of the business they have owned for at least 10 years or more.

### **Research Design**

The research design used was a descriptive multiple case study design, which was used to conduct semistructured, face-to-face interviews with each participant. A case

study design also gave me the opportunity to utilize company documents as a data collection tool. Leedy and Ormrod (2013) noted that research design involves exploring research questions and drawing conclusions to prepare a model for others to utilize.

The main designs that make up qualitative research are phenomenological, ethnography, and case study (Petty, Thomas, & Stew, 2012). In a phenomenological study, the researcher seeks to understand “unique” lived experiences of individuals (Englander, 2012). Researchers in phenomenological studies are interested in gaining insights into the experiences, attitudes, behaviors, processes, and opinions of the individuals being studied (Rowley, 2012). A phenomenological study was not appropriate for this research topic because I wanted to know why and how participants function in their environment. Although I conducted interviews as part of my case study, I also used company documents, such as profit and loss statements and cash flow statements to gain more in-depth understanding of the strategies used to achieve sustainability.

An ethnographic research design explores the daily lives, behaviors, and activities of a culture or community over a specific period (Pritchard, 2011). Because I did not look at each participant for extended periods of time to explore data, an ethnographic research design was not appropriate. New participants were interviewed until saturation was achieved through the use of semistructured interviews. Kolb (2012) and Walker (2012) suggested that data saturation results occur when no new information was obtained that was not previously noted.

### **Population and Sampling**

Verner and Abdullah (2012) stated that a case study includes an in-depth exploration of a small number of cases or a single case. This study involved a purposeful sample consisting of three participants who owned successful small businesses in operation beyond 10 years in Birmingham, Alabama. Purposeful sampling methods target a population that meets certain criteria established by the researcher to gain a sample of participants in the phenomenon (Suri, 2011). In purposeful sampling, researchers use their judgment to select participants based on the study criteria (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Participants were interviewed until saturation was reached. I knew when saturation was complete when I began to uncover the same common themes from different participants in the study.

The participants chosen for this study had to meet the criteria of owning a small business located in Birmingham, Alabama. The owner of the business had to be the original owner who started the business. Additionally, business owners must have been in operation for at least 10 years. The business must have no more than 50 employees. Finally, the business must operate from a brick-and-mortar office space and cannot operate from a residential home office.

The participants of the study received an invitation to participate presented in an e-mail message. There was a follow-up call to explain the research and ask for participation. The participants who agreed to participate in the study received an informed consent form presented in a subsequent e-mail and were asked to reply to the e-mail by indicating their consent to participate. Each interview was conducted in a setting

most comfortable for the participant and was agreed upon before the face-to-face interview being completed. Initial interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were audio recorded, and I took notes in a journal.

### **Ethical Research**

Jones, Edwards, and While (2011) posited the treatment of research participants is a critical concern that must be at the forefront of all research decisions and considerations. Prior to contacting potential participants, I applied for and received approval from Walden's Institutional Review Board (Approval No. 11-25-15-0246336). To remain ethical with the completion of the research, there was an informed consent form signed by each participant. An e-mail was sent to each participant that included the informed consent form, an outline of the nature of the study, and asked for the participation of the small business owner. I also included in the consent form that participation was 100% voluntary and at any point in the process, a participant could withdraw from being a participant without penalty and no further obligation to the research. To withdraw from participating in the study, a participant could have called me or provided a statement in writing informing me of their decision to no longer participate in the study. There was no form of compensation or incentives offered for participation in the study.

Steps to make sure participants were ethically protected included renaming each participant by labeling them as participants and assigning them a number (i.e., Participant #1 or Participant #2) instead of the name of the business or individual. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, all information about the participants will remain

secured in a locked filing cabinet for 5 years and then be destroyed (Luo, 2011). Mitchell and Wellings (2013) noted that the researcher should be the only one to have access to the participant's personal information. There was no use of names of the individuals or businesses who participated in the study.

## **Data Collection**

### **Data Collection Instrument**

Qualitative researchers can often serve as the instrument for a study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). As the researcher, I was the primary instrument used in the data collection process. Data collection in qualitative research can involve direct interactions with an individual or interaction in a group setting (Petty et al., 2012). Some of the secondary sources for collecting qualitative data are focus groups, observations, individual interviews, and documentation (Petty et al., 2012). Data for case studies have six origins and must be collected from at least two of the following six available sources; (a) archival records, (b) direct observations, (c) documentation, (d) interviews, (e) participant-observation (i.e. site visits), or (f) physical artifacts (Yin, 2012). I collected data through semistructured, face to face interviews with three successful small business owners who have been operating in Birmingham, Alabama for at least 10 years. In addition to the interviews, I asked participants to provide documentation of their profit and loss statements and cash flow statements as a data collection instrument.

I developed and followed an interview protocol (Appendix A) to guide my data collection. I followed a case study protocol, which was a key for a multiple case study research design and aided me in keeping the focus on my topic while assisting with the

reliability (Yin, 2014). A case study protocol consists of (a) an overview of the case study, (b) data collection procedures, (c) data collection procedures, and (d) a guide for the case study report (Yin, 2014). I asked interview questions that were opened ended to allow for elaboration by the participants, enabling me to take detailed notes. Ocak (2011) determined that interviews are a useful approach for collecting data from participants regarding a phenomenon. Each interview was audio recorded, with permission of the participants; the business owners interviewed will have been in business for 10 or more years of operation. Each initial interview lasted approximately 45 minutes long. The use of NViVo software was used to record and transcribe each of the interviews.

To enhance the reliability and validity of the data collected, I made sure that once I conducted the interviews with participants, I re-listened to the audio recording and reviewed my journal notes. An e-mail was sent to each participant after I transcribed the data and results of the interview. The purpose of the follow-up e-mail was to share my interpretation of the interview with the participants for validation. This process is called member checking, which ensured that my findings were in alignment with their intentions (See Appendix B). Member checking is when participant validation techniques are used for improving the accuracy and reliability of a study (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Hudson et al. (2014) recommended that researchers conduct member checking to verify the accuracy of the information obtained from study participants. Greater validity was gained through methodological triangulation came from me conducting interview questions with participants, direct observations, and reviewing company documents. Verner and

Abdullah (2012) stated that methodological triangulation increases the assurance of the validity of case study findings.

### **Data Collection Technique**

The data collection techniques for this study were interviews and company documentation review. In the case study design, the researcher is responsible for determining the most effective technique to gather data from the study participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The semistructured interview method was appropriate for the study and provided me with the flexibility to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses or to expand the interview into a new topic introduced by the participants through their responses (Landgren & Hallström, 2011). Interviews are effective and an important data collection technique that plays a principal role in the data collection of qualitative research (Moustakas, 1994). Company documentation that I reviewed was the profit and loss statements and cash flow statements.

The advantage of using interviews as the data collection technique was that it allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the strategies of the small business owners that could not be understood by conducting another technique such as a survey. I was able to gain lots of insight into the minds of the small business owners; I was also able to observe the body language of the participants and ask follow-up questions to gain more clarity regarding a particular response. The advantage of reviewing company documentation is that it provided me with more accurate data that strengthened the validity of the study.

Some of the disadvantages include the length of time it took to recruit and conduct face-to-face interviews, which caused me to spend lots of hours trying to secure participants for the required amount of time needed to conduct interviews in this manner. A second disadvantage was the number of participants studied to gain data is lesser than that of doing a survey allowing me to get participation from hundreds of small business owners. A third and final disadvantage was getting the data transcribed in a timely fashion that allowed for me to get back to the participants and gain clarity on my finding and their original intent. A disadvantage of asking for company documentation was the risk of some companies not being willing to participate in the study because they did not want to share the type of information requested. Member checking was used to ensure that the interpretation I received from the data aligned with what the participants meant when we originally conducted the interview.

### **Data Organization Techniques**

There must be an appropriate data storage strategy used to maintain the integrity of the transcribed interviews, audio recordings, and any backup copies of interviews (Anyan, 2013). Data was organized by maintaining a master journal consisting of the interview questions and participant's responses. There were also labels before each participant's section in the master journal so that accuracy of statements will remain in alignment with the correct participant. A label heading will be used containing a participant number (i.e. participant 1, 2, 3, etc.) for each company. The data captured under each participant's label included nonverbal cues, interview setting, and if anything unusual happened during the interview (i.e. audio recording malfunctions, frequent

interruptions by participant's staff, etc.). Having labels allowed me to reference more easily back to a particular part of the participant's interview without having to locate it through filtering all of the data collected for that participant. Also, I utilized a research journal to capture my thoughts and reflect on each interview. This journal was used within 24 to 48 hours after the initial interview took place. Each of these steps was used to identify themes, patterns, trends, and main topics that emerged and note conflicting participant interpretations, alternative perspectives, and critiques (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). All raw data, interview notes, audio recordings, transcribed interview notes, and my reflective journal will be safely secured in a locked cabinet in my home for 5 years and destroyed after that (Harnish, 2012).

### **Data Analysis Technique**

Preparing and organizing data in qualitative research requires organizing the data into themes by coding, condensing the codes, and making sense of the data through figures, tables, or in discussions (Arnold & Lane, 2011). Methodological triangulation was used as part of this multiple case study. A researcher can get a more comprehensive picture through methodological triangulation than by using one type of data collection alone (Heale & Forbes, 2013). The focus of this study was to identify, categorize, and interpret themes that aid in helping small businesses to sustain their operations beyond 10 years. After the interviews had been completed, I shared my interpretation of each interview with participants by e-mail to ensure validity through member checking. Member checking can be used to make sure that the proper interpretation of the data and

word choice was used once the transcribed interview is written (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013).

After I receive the confirmation from participants that the data collected was accurate, I then used computer software to search for themes that derived from the interviews and audio recordings conducted with small business owners. I looked at the profit and loss statements and cash flow statements to identify common themes. Rowley (2012) stated that software may allow the researcher to interpret and code the text, perform keyword searches, and organize the text. The use of the software NVivo 10<sup>th</sup> version was used to assist in analyzing the data and coding the themes that were revealed from the data. Before using NVivo software, I reviewed my interview notes, listen to the audio recordings, and look at my reflections so that I could ensure the accuracy of the data received from each participant. I made sure to exercise precautions in my data analysis to try to reduce bias from impacting the data analysis process (Markova, Perry, & Farmer, 2011).

I designed the interview questions for this study (Appendix A) to guide the collection of data relating to factors identified in existing research as possibly contributing to small business sustainability. General systems theory is the scientific exploration of wholes and wholeness (von Bertalanffy, 1972). By using a systems theory approach as my conceptual framework, I explored the multiple strategies used by small business owners as a whole to become sustainable businesses. I compared the results of the data analysis to the literature and indicated if the outcome of the data analysis were

(a) similar to the existing literature, (b) different from the existing literature, or (c) similar to but inconsistent with the existing literature.

### **Reliability and Validity**

According to Corrigan, Desnick, Marshall, Bentov, and Rosenblatt (2011), keeping a journal can have a positive effect and creates a trail of ideas and insights for a researcher to include as additional data to analyze, thereby contributing to the reliability and validity of the study. Street and Ward (2012) stated that reliability and validity are two commonly used terms researchers use when discussing accuracy and precision of data collected. In qualitative research, dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability are the elements used to determine reliability and validity (Cope, 2014; Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013).

### **Dependability**

The terms reliability and internal validity in quantitative research are synonymous with dependability and credibility in qualitative research (Munn, Porritt, Lockwood, Aromataris, & Pearson, 2013). I followed an interview protocol (Appendix A) for the interviews I conducted and collected company documents from the participants. After the interviews, I e-mailed participants my completed transcript to give them an opportunity to check for errors or discrepancies in the data collected. The use of the qualitative data analysis software NVivo was used to strengthen further the dependability of the study. This study was a qualitative case study that involved exploring strategies that could contribute to increasing small business sustainability beyond 10 years.

## **Credibility**

Credibility refers to the ability of future researchers to make the same observations of a phenomenon if they conduct the research using the same procedures (Ali & Yusof, 2011). Credibility concerns truths; provides affirmation that data collection was accurate; and ensures findings, interpretations, and conclusions emerging from the research are factual and accurately represent real-world phenomena (Frost et al., 2011). In qualitative research, credibility assesses whether there is a match between the source of the data collected and the interpretation of the researcher (Munn et al., 2014). Credibility can be enhanced by me sharing my experience as a researcher and verifying the finding of my research with each participant (Cope, 2014). The use of NVivo 10 qualitative analysis software and continuous review of my researcher notes may improve credibility. I repeated the data analysis until themes and patterns were clearly identifiable, therefore increasing credibility (Markova et al., 2011). Leedy and Ormrod (2013) stated that qualitative validity involves trustworthiness and credibility.

To improve trustworthiness throughout the study, I included triangulation, member checking, and disclosing and monitoring researcher bias. Triangulation is a method used to strengthen the validity of a qualitative study by the use of multiple data collection methods such as interviews, observations, and journaling recordings throughout the research process (Cope, 2014). Company documents were collected and analyzed along with the interviews through methodological triangulation to increase further the credibility of the data. Member checking is a participant validation technique used to improve the reliability, validity, accuracy, and credibility of a qualitative study

(Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Participants in the study had the opportunity to review my transcribed interviews and research findings before the research was finalized. Once participants verified the accuracy of the statements that was derived from the data analysis and research findings, the credibility of the data was improved.

### **Transferability**

Researchers must examine the degree in which the qualitative findings can be transferred to other contexts or settings outside of the research (Onwuegbuzie, 2012; Houghton et al., 2013). Transferability will apply to this research study through the research findings being meaningful to individuals who are not a part of the study (Cope, 2014). Employees, their families, vendors, customers, and other stakeholders can use the research findings in this study because they would be directly affected by a small business that lacks sustainability strategies. Readers of this study will be able to take the findings and apply them to their small business to strengthen their sustainability strategies. Future researchers will be able to utilize this study as a tool to build upon through further researching the themes and strategies uncovered.

### **Conformability**

Conformability was seen in this research study by me including the participants' responses to each interview question in the appendix section after the research had been conducted (Cope, 2014). By including participant answers in the appendix, readers will be able to identify that the findings did not derive from my personal biases of viewpoints, but rather from the themes that emerged from the participants.

To ensure data saturation I continued interviewing participants until no new information was uncovered (Dworkin, 2012). In this research study, a sample size of three participants, while using methodological triangulation, transcript review, and member checking further helped to ensure data saturation and improve the credibility of the study.

### **Transition and Summary**

A few of the key topics discussed in Section 2 included the restatement of the purpose of the study topic, the research methodology and design that was used while completing the study, the role of the researcher, and the participants. Semistructured interviews was conducted of at three small business owners in the Birmingham, Alabama, to explore emerging themes from businesses that have been in operation for at least 10 years. Interviews continued until data saturation was obtained by the researcher. I collected company documents and reviewed them through methodological triangulation along with the interview results.

Section 3 begins with an introduction and a restatement of the purpose of the research study, along with the central research question. Section 3 contains the overview and study findings, including the study's business relevance, applications to professional practice, and implications for social change. Section 3 also contains recommendations for action and future studies.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies small business owners use to increase chances of sustainability beyond 10 years. Small businesses create the majority of jobs in the United States and are a key economic growth driver (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2014). I conducted semistructured interviews with three small business owners in Birmingham, Alabama, who have sustained their operation beyond 10 years. Triangulation took place by reviewing the transcribed interview data along with the company documents, cash flow statements, and profit and loss statements received by each participant (Oleinik, 2011). Names of the individuals or the business were not used to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Once data saturation was achieved, I utilized NVivo data analysis software to assist me in identifying themes and key strategies that answered the central research question. The following themes emerged from the research, based on of methodological triangulation: great customer service, building relationships, finding your passion.

#### **Presentation of the Findings**

The findings from the study aligned well with the systems theory, in that each emergent theme is dependent upon the other in order assist business owners in building a sustainable business. System theory is the discipline of studying interrelationships rather than individual components and patterns of change (von Bertalanffy, 1972). Instead of business owners using each theme independently, they can use the themes collectively to assist in the sustainability of the business. The focus of systems theory is interconnectivity between the parts and the relationship between parts that connect them

together as a whole (Miles, 2013). I used participant interviews and company documents, such as profit and loss statements and cash flow statements, to complete my methodological triangulation of data for this study. I collected the responses to answer the following research question: What are the business strategies of small business owners who have sustained their businesses beyond 10 years?

Of the two data sources, I collected the largest amount of data from interviewing the participants. I reached data saturation when the interview data and company documents reviewed became repetitive, and no additional information was added. I entered the interview data and company documents into the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo. The following three main themes emerged: (a) great customer service, (b) building relationships, and (c) finding your passion.

The first theme that emerged involved the importance of providing great customer service to every client. The second emergent theme included the small business owners' ability to build strong relationships both internally and externally. The third emergent theme revealed the importance of finding your passion. Each of the emergent themes aligned well with the conceptual frameworks used for the study, which was the general systems theory. Each theme can be utilized by the small business owner collectively to affect the overall sustainability of the company to operate beyond 10 years.

### **Emergent Theme 1: Great Customer Service**

The first theme to emerge was the need for the small business owner to provide great customer service to their customers. One hundred percent of the participants mentioned customer satisfaction as an important component of building a sustainable

small business beyond 10 years of operation. The theme of providing good customer services aligns with the general systems theory because each participant mentioned how customer service aided in their ability to attract and maintain new customers. Systems theory looks at how different components of an operation link together and affects the whole of the organization (Mangal, 2013). A small business owner can utilize the company size to their advantage when seeking to build great customer service because the owner can interact more frequently with their clients as opposed to with larger businesses (Anderson & Ullah, 2014). Larger businesses are unable to build personal relationships with their customers, like small business owners, due to small business owners not having layers of employees and managers in between themselves and the customers the business serves.

The responses given by participants from Interview Questions 4 and 5 revealed that customer service was a key ingredient in the sustainability of each participant's small business. Participant 2 stated his goal was "pleasing our customers no matter what the cost. Whatever the customer perceives as fair is what I'm willing to do." Participant 1 confirmed this strategy by stating, "Make sure your client knows that when they walk through the door, they are the most important person, and they feel that throughout the entire process." Additionally, Participant 3 stated, "Prepare for your customers and try to nourish them so that you can keep them coming back." The theme of great customer service aligns with the systems theory by showing how important customer service is to the overall success of a small business. If a small business owner knows how to treat both the employees and customers in a way that makes them feel respected and appreciated,

there will be tangible and intangible results from the business. An example of the tangible results might be increased sales from repeat customers, and intangible results might be and building a strong reputation within the community. Each theme mentioned works together in wholeness to assist small business owners in sustaining their business beyond 10 years of operation.

Being a small business can have some advantages of being able to become closer to customers through the owner having more frequent interactions (Anderson & Ullah, 2014). Participant 3 stated, "Being accessible to clients is critical to any small business." It is important for small business owners to make sure customers feel respected and listened to so that the customers will want to come back to purchase more and create repeat business (Sinfield, Calder, McConnell, & Colson, 2012). Participant 1 stated, "We treat our clients with tremendous respect." One response given by Participant 2 confirmed the importance of customer service in his business, when he stated, "Treat people how you want to be treated." Reviewing the 2015 cash flow statements for Participant 2 and Participant 3 revealed that little amounts of money were spent on advertising. During the interview, the participants stated that they focused a lot on providing great customer service, which is what they each believed contributed to their sustainability.

Table 2 identifies the frequency with which customer service was mentioned throughout the interview and the percentage of interview questions answered by referencing customer service as a strategy used to create a sustainable small business. Participants 1 and 2 mentioned customer service in three of the five interview questions,

which made up 60% of the responses collected. Participant 3 referenced customer service in two of his five interview responses, which he mentioned in 40% of his interview responses.

Table 2

*Number of Times Customer Service Mentioned*

Customer Service	Times Mentioned	% of Responses
Participant 1, Interview question 2, 4, & 5	3	60
Participant 2, Interview question 4 & 5	3	60
Participant 3, Interview questions 4 & 5	2	40

The theme of providing great customer service to customers was confirmed by previous literature (Anderson & Ullah, 2014; Mangal, 2013); therefore, this theme builds upon the existing research on small business sustainability. All participants identified customer service as a required component of their business sustainability.

**Emergent theme and past literature.** One way customer service can be improved is through providing employee development (Kim et al., 2013). Employee development can increase the productivity of the employees in the business, which can lead to improved customer service. Bryant and Allen (2013) identified employee development as a vital component of small business sustainability. Employee development was mentioned by Participant 2 in Interview Questions 1 and 4, when he stated, “One key to his success was giving his employees an incentive to work hard stay motivated.” By keeping employees motivated, business owners put their business in a

position to offer the best customer service to its customers, which may increase the sustainability of the company.

### **Emergent Theme 2: Building Relationships**

The second emergent theme revealed from the data collection was the ability for the small business owner to build strong relationships. Participant 2 stated, in response to Interview Question 4, “You cannot overvalue relationships.” Interview Question 5 revealed that relationship building skills are essential to the sustainability of small business by Participant 3 stating that “relationship building is important.” Building relationships with customers is important, and building internal relationships with employees is essential. In his response to Interview Question 3, Participant 3 mentioned, “People like to know who the owner is, and in a small business this is vital.” Table 3 shows that Participant 2 referred to the importance of building relationships in three of his five responses, which accounted for 60% of the replies given by Participant 2. Participants 1 and 3 both mentioned the importance building relationships was in the sustainability of their business in two of the five interview questions, accounting for 40% of the responses given by participants.

Table 3

#### *Number of Times Building Relationships Mentioned*

Questions where participants mentioned relationship building	Times Mentioned	% of Responses
Participant 1, Interview questions 4 & 5	2	40
Participant 2, Interview questions 1, 4, & 5	3	60
Participant 3, Interview questions 3 & 5	2	40

Building relationships both internally and externally was mentioned by all participants in the form of partnerships with businesses looking to grow together. Establishing trust with customers, suppliers, vendors, employees, and other industry professionals is one key component of building a sustainable small business (de Klerk & Saayman, 2012). Participant 2 stated, “You have to know how to have relationships,” in his response to Interview Question 1. Later in the interview, Participant 2 also mentioned, “I’m friends with my vendors.” The statement made by Participant 2 aligns well with the research of de Klerk and Saayman (2012), who stated that a key component of running a successful small business is establishing trust with suppliers, vendors, and other industry professionals.

Building relationships aligns with the conceptual framework for this study because it shows the dependency that a small business has in gaining customers and utilizing suppliers. In the overall scheme of a small business, key partnerships have to be made to do business effectively on a daily basis, which ties into the overall success of the small business. A small business owner who is seeking to build a business that will sustain beyond 10 years can develop the necessary soft skills such as building relationships as an individual component of running a small business that contributes to the wholeness of running a successful business.

**Emergent theme and past literature.** The emergent theme of building relationships confirms what previous researchers have uncovered as a part of findings. Previous research was consistent that building relationships externally can have a positive effect on the sustainability of the small business (Augusto et al., 2012; Keating et al.,

2013). The size of the business can also play a significant role in building relationships with the business owner and the customers, vendors, and employees (Anderson & Ullah, 2014). Building relationships aligns well with systems theory, because when employees focus on providing great customer service, it can generate repeat customers, which can positively aid in the sustainability of the business. Systems theory is when individual components of an organization can come together and make an impact on the organization as a whole (Mangal, 2013).

Each participant in this study mentioned the importance of being able to establish and maintain healthy relationships because it can affect performance and customer service. Participant 1 mentioned how in her business, 4 years ago she partnered with a catering company to expand their services, which has increased her sales. Taking a step to partner with an outside catering company aligns with the research of Chrisman, McMullen, Ring, and Holt (2012) when they stated that limitations exist among all business owners that require them to tap into external assistance when evaluating new ideas or strategies.

Participant 2 summed up the value of building relationships in his response to Interview Question 5, when he stated, “The crux of everything in business falls on knowing how to build the right relationships.” The research of Keating et al. (2013) further confirmed the statement from Participant 2; they stated that a small business owner must recognize when their organization’s ability to sustain without his or her capacity requires bringing in external expertise. Participant 1 revealed the use of an external company to handle her payroll and accounting functions for the business.

### **Emergent Theme 3: Finding Your Passion**

The third emergent theme revealed from the data was finding what your passion is in business. Participant 1 and Participant 2 mentioned owning a business in the industry you love is a key to running a sustainable business. In Interview Question 3, Participant 1 mentioned, “you really have to have a passion and a dream for what you do.” Participant 3 responded to Interview Question 1 by stating, “find something that you enjoy doing, because the business takes a major part of your life away.” Participant 2 mentioned that you have to be passionate about helping others and finding out what your employees are passionate about doing. The statement made by Participant 2 aligns with systems theory because it shows that an employee who is passionate about their job, can impact the business as a whole. If employees are not passionate about their job, it could negatively affect their interactions with customers, and lead to a lack of sustainability of the business.

Existing literature supports the importance of being passionate about the industry that you choose to start a business. Tasmin, Yahya, and Zainuddin, (2014), stated the more passionate a person is about their passion, the more sentimental they will be about achieving their business goals. Degeorge and Fayolle (2011) stated that business owners are more passionate about their work and are willing to work longer hours when they feel they have autonomy of choice and decisional freedom. Participant 3 confirmed Degeorge and Fayolle’s statement when he mentioned how being in business can take away a major part of your life. Another statement made by Participant 3 in the interview was him stating that “when a person finds their passion, work is no longer work, it becomes fun.”

This statement also ties into what Degeorge and Fayolle (2011) uncovered in their research regarding the autonomy of choice and decisional freedom.

Table 4 shows the frequency in which passion was mentioned in answering the interview questions. Participant 1 mentioned finding your passion as a key component of running a sustainable business in two of the five interview responses she gave, which accounted for 40% of her interview responses. Participant 2 did not mention passion as a tool to help him build a sustainable business. Participant 3 mentioned finding your passion in his response to Interview Question 1, which accounted for 20% of the five interview responses given. In addition to the response of Participant 3, he mentioned that a small business owner must love what he does so much that it will be rewarding enough for them to spend so much time away from family in order to run their business.

Table 4

*Number of Times Participant Mentioned Finding Your Passion*

Questions where participants mentioned finding your passion	Times Mentioned	% of Responses
Participant 1, Interview questions 1 & 3	2	40%
Participant 2, Did not mention passion	0	0%
Participant 3, Interview question 1	1	20%

Finding your passion does not confirm what previous researchers have mentioned as a theme for running a sustainable business. Therefore, the finding, from this research, extends the knowledge in the discipline of small business sustainability. Reppert (2012) mentioned the importance of networking in running a sustainable small business.

Management education and experience were referred to by Chinomona (2013) as being a

component that small business owners must possess when seeking to build a sustainable operation. In his response to Interview Question 2, Participant 2 mentioned continuing education as a tool he used to remain competent in his industry, but Participants 1 and 3 did not mention education in their answers. Participant 2's response aligned with the research of Teck-Hong and Yong-Kean (2012) when they stated that business owners who promoted continuing education throughout their business had a lower risk of failure.

Previous research also revealed capital and financial management as a characteristic that small business owners must be proficient in to sustain their business. Proper funding and having financial management procedures can aid in the sustainability of a small business (Kozan & Akdeniz, 2014; Moeller & Valentinov, 2012). During the interviews, none of the participants mentioned proper funding or financial management strategies as a key component of building a sustainable business. The theme of finding your passion can be added to the existing body of knowledge, and can be further explored by future researchers.

**Emergent themes tied back to the conceptual framework.** The conceptual framework that aligned with this research was systems theory. Systems theory is when a group of individual parts interact with one another to function as a whole (Mangal, 2013). In applying the general systems theory, each small business owner's individual ability to provide great customer service, build relationships, and find their passion, all contribute to sustaining their business as a whole. No individual characteristic alone can aid in making a business sustain for 10 or more years; it takes finding your passion, building relationships, and great customer service working together that helps the business in the

overall sustainability of the operation. If a business owner provides great customer service, yet lacks the ability to build strong relationships with vendors, customers, and employees, the business would not be able to sustain operations (Toson, 2012). Because each characteristic is needed for the overall sustainability of the company, the themes identified align with the systems theory.

The research results further align with von Bertalanffy's (1972) theory that suggests all parts of an entity contribute to a functioning system. As a small business owner, if one does not possess the ability to function in each of the three emergent themes, it could aid in the inability of the business to sustain beyond 10 years. The theme of building relationships ties back to the conceptual framework because a business may make the best products in town, but if the owner lacks the necessary skills to encourage the customer to do business with them, the business will be unsuccessful. Drack and Schwarz (2010) suggested that general systems theory requires numerous factors working together as a whole to ensure success.

The theme of passion ties back to systems theory because passion is what causes business owners to stay motivated to keep doing the day to day operations when they do not see immediate results. If a small business owner lacks passion, other parts of the business will be negatively affected such as the way employees are treated, which leads to negative customer service. Lack of passion can also hinder business owners from continuously going out to build relationships that are needed to continue improving the company. Greater understanding of the common themes and patterns can lead to solutions from a better understanding of the problem as a whole (Mehrjerdi, 2011).

**Research findings and past literature.** The results of research from this study contributes to the existing literature, as it pertains to the research question; what business strategies successful small business owners have used to sustain their business beyond 10 years. Miles (2013) identified employee development, financial management strategies, and management education and experience, as some key components that aid in small business sustainability. One of the emergent themes that aligned with the existing literature was building relationships as a strategy used to sustain your business.

Building relationships involve both the ability to establish strong internal and external relationships with employees, customers, vendors, suppliers, and industry professionals (de Klerk & Saayman, 2012). Keating et al. (2013) stated, if a business owner does not have specific skills in a particular area, they must be able to recognize their lack of competence and be willing to go outside the organization to complete the task. Chrisman et al. (2012), identified that every business owner will have to build relationships outside their organization, due to limitations that exist, no matter the education level, knowledge or experience gained. Research conducted by Awuah and Reintert (2012) stated that a small business owner's ability to develop business relationships in their market can lead to the failure or success of the business.

Networking was another strategy mentioned in the research findings from Cote (2012) stating the value in using this skill among friends, family, community groups, and government groups. In addition to networking skills, past research identified with the use of outside assistance in the areas where the business owner may not have the expertise in

(Keating et al., 2013). Participants 1 and two both mentioned how they utilized external assistance through vendors and suppliers to strengthen the success of their business.

Providing great customer service was another theme identified by this study's participants that build upon the existing literature. Sinfield et al. (2012) stated the importance of listening to consumer insights and responding to their needs. A business owner has to spend time listening to their employees and their customers if the owner wants to provide customer service. Participant 1 mentioned how she spends time listening to her potential clients and allowing them to share their goals with her before she starts making recommendations. O'Donnell (2011) further confirms the importance of customer service in small business sustainability when he stated that customer service is a principle means in which a small business owner retains customers.

The existing literature mentions the importance of passion in a small business setting and how sustainability can be achieved, if the owner is passionate about the product or service. Tasnim, Yahya, and Zainuddin (2014) identified that the more passionate the business owner is about their company, the more sentimental they were towards achieving their goals. Small business owners are willing to work longer hours and not get as easily discouraged when they are passionate about what they do. The identified themes link together in building a strategy that can aid in helping small business sustainability in the southeastern regions of the United States. The inability to maintain a balance of each identified themes one could hinder small businesses from attaining further growth.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

The applicability of providing great customer service, building relationships, and finding your passion are all relevant findings to the professional practice of business. Small firms are significant in job creation; however, they are inherently unstable because of their increased likelihood of failure and have a high exit rate (Haltiwanger, Jarmin, & Miranda, 2013). Exit rate is when in a given period, the number of firms that cease operations during that period, divided by the total number of firms that operated during the same period. The data from the participant interviews and company documents revealed strategies for sustainability that have the potential to aid small business owners in numerous ways. I have contributed to the current research and enhanced the existing body of knowledge regarding experiences of small business owners in the southeastern United States with businesses in existence for at least 10 years.

The findings revealed in the study can contribute to existing literature. The findings acquired from the study have further applicability to improve business practice by educating future and current small business owners on sustainability strategies. Small business owners can review their ability to (a) provide great customer service, (b) build relationships, and (c) function in their passion and implement strategies to follow these emergent themes to help sustain their business beyond 10 years. There are over 600,000 small businesses in the southeastern United States that employ thousands of individuals each year (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2014). As a small business owner, being able to build a sustainable business beyond 10 years will have a positive effect on the families, communities, and local economy.

Small business owners that recognize the importance of providing great customer service, building relationships, and finding their passion can increase the sustainability of their business in the southeastern region of the United States beyond 10 years. Having good customer service is important because it reduces the amount of money spent on acquiring new customers, which increases the business revenue in future years, and aids in improving sustainability (Weimer, Hartwiger, Walter, & Doerr, 2012). The theme participants identified most frequently in their interview responses that aligned with past research was building relationships.

The importance of building relationships goes beyond solely focusing on the customer, and expands into building relationships with employees, vendors, and suppliers (de Klerk & Saayman, 2012). Chrisman et al. (2012) further supports building relationships as a key factor, by stating that a small business owner must be able to identify when they need to seek external help in continuing to drive their business forward. Building relationships are relevant to the improved business practice because having an understanding of these strategies can affect every aspect of the business owner being able to sustain their business. Given the importance of building relationships, business owners should seek out training on how to develop these soft skills if they lack in this area.

Being able to identify your passion is the third emergent theme identified in the participant's responses. Tasnim et al. (2014) indicated that the more passionate a small business owner is, the more sentimental they are towards the achievement of their business goals. Being sentimental aids in motivating business owners to work longer

hours, push harder towards reaching sales goals, and developing the soft skills needed to operate a sustainable business (Tasnim et al., 2014). The results of my research indicate that if a person wants to start and sustain a small business, they need to develop these skills to increase the likelihood of the business surviving beyond 10 years.

### **Implications for Social Change**

In the United States, small businesses are the source of most job creations (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2014). Small business is the primary engine of innovation, jobs, and growth (Gale & Brown, 2013). The U.S. Small Business Administration discovered only around 50% of all new small businesses survive 5 years or more and about 75% survive 10 years or more (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2014). Results of this study (a) providing customer service, (b) building relationships, and (c) finding your passion, offers small business owners a glimpse of current strategies taken by other small business owners to achieve sustainability beyond 10 years.

Many start-ups fail in the first years following opening their doors; about 47% of the jobs created by start-ups are eliminated in the first 5 years (Haltiwanger et al., 2013). Small businesses are essential to the health of the United States economy as they account for approximately 50% of all jobs and 99% of all firms (Labeledz & Berry, 2011). Small business failure results in a loss of income and employment for the owner, the employees, and their families. The research findings can affect social change if a small business owner reviews the findings from this study and implement strategies for providing customer service, building relationships, and finding their passion. When a small business owner operates a sustainable business, it contributes to the prosperity of their employees,

their families, the communities, and the local economy through tax revenue. Operating a sustainable business can reduce the unemployment rate, by providing jobs for individuals in the communities the business serves. Families who are employed may not have to rely on government assistance and live in low-income communities, as a result of receiving regular pay from the business.

### **Recommendations for Action**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive multiunit case study was to explore and reveal what strategies small business owners used to sustain their businesses beyond 10 years. Small businesses make up about half of private sector output, employ more than half of private sector workers, and produce a large share of new jobs (Byrd, Ross, & Glackin, 2013). Current small business owners, entrepreneurs, and future small business owners should pay attention to the results because they can benefit from the research findings, which were, the importance of providing great customer service, building relationships, and finding their passion. I identified three themes that aided in the sustainability of small business owners in the southeastern United States, beyond 10 years; and new and existing businesses who have not reached 10 years in operation can learn from the research findings. Also, I recommend the Small Business Development Center Network (SBDC) and the U.S. Small Business Administration district branches in states throughout the southeastern United States should pay attention to the results and share them with potential future and current small business owners.

Business school professors and instructors should pay attention to the research findings, so they can share the information with their current and future students. Sharing

the results of this research study with students, can provide education and strategies for the students in an environment where they can learn, without having to go through the experience of starting a small business without the knowledge of the research findings; therefore having to experience closing their small business before it reaches 10 years of operation. Additionally, I plan to present the findings of this study to small business conferences and in industry trade journals such as the Journal of Small Business and Entrepreneurship, Journal of Small Business Strategy, and the Journal of Small Business Management.

The results of this study will be presented at industry conferences and small business workshops such as the American Management Association and other industry conferences, trainings, and seminars that focus on the sustainability of small businesses. I will conduct additional research in the future, surrounding the topic of small business sustainability that will be presented to academic journals for publication. I will provide the participants of my study with an overview of the findings, and provide them with instructions on how they can retrieve the full paper to read and share with their staff. My final recommendation is not only for local small business owners in the southeastern United States, but small business owners in other regions throughout the United States to pay attention to the results and findings to see if the strategies uncovered can aid businesses in other regions to sustain beyond 10 years.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

In this qualitative multiple case study, the primary limitation was the sample size of participants. Recommendations for further studies can include a study involving a

larger sample size of participants. Data saturation was achieved after interviewing three participants in this study. Data saturation involves continually adding new participants and collecting data for the study until the data set is complete, which happens when no new information is being obtained (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). A study based in a different geographical location, other than the southeastern United States is recommended see if findings will be similar or different in other regions.

I recommend that future researchers should study a specific industry of small business owners as opposed to various industries. Also, a longitudinal study conducted over a more extensive period is recommended to account for changes in business stability. I recommend conducting studies regarding the emergent themes of customer service, building relationships, and finding your passion in relation to small business sustainability. Additionally, I recommend conducting a study of small businesses that have greater than 50 employees. This study was based on a qualitative research method with a case study design; other methodologies and designs should be considered for further research on small business sustainability strategies. My final recommendation would be to conduct a similar study that researchs franchises to see if the findings will be different or similar.

### **Reflections**

My experience within the DBA Doctoral Study process has been a great learning experience. I have been challenged spiritually, mentally, physically, and academically in ways that I did not know could happen when I started the program. Starting the process of obtaining my doctorate was something I knew would help me in gaining additional

knowledge and understanding of the topic I chose on small business sustainability. I have learned more about small business in the United States, and more specifically about small business in the southeastern region of the United States. I believe I can now confidently go out and share my research findings with current and future business owners and stand behind my recommendations to help each small business become sustainable beyond 10 years.

As the researcher, I made sure to follow the interview protocol to minimize error and research bias (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Another step taken to reduce bias was that I did not personally know the small business owners I interviewed. During the interviews, I controlled my reactions to the interview responses, so that it would not influence the participants to answer questions differently. I feel that I did not have an effect on the participants, in the way they responded to the interview question. Each business owner has been successful for many years, so sharing their strategies for sustainability was not intimidating for them. I feel that meeting with each of the small business owners and gaining an understanding into their world of running a sustainable business was inspiring and notable. Each person I interviewed shared a similar passion and desire to succeed in business, even though they all operated in various industries. I can tell from conducting the interviews, without the owners being the driving force behind each business, the sustainability of each company would have been different.

I now have a greater level of respect for anyone running a small business, or having a desire to run a small business. From the research findings, I identified how sustainable small businesses provide jobs for others in the communities and be socially

responsible for making sure to give back. My changes in thinking, after completing the study is that I was surprised by the themes uncovered during this process. Starting out the study, I was unsure about how the results of the study would be. I thought there would be a “magic bullet” or “special thing” businesses that have sustained did to aid in their overall success. However, the findings revealed to me that there are no magic bullets or special things that have to be done, just a focus on doing the fundamentals consistently and intently with every customer. By focusing on the fundamentals of providing great customer service, building relationships, and pursuing their passion, small business owners have been able to provide a great lifestyle for themselves, their employees, and the communities they serve. I now have a greater love for the phrase, “stick to the basics.”

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore what strategies small business owners used to achieve sustainability beyond 10 years. I collected data using methodological triangulation of two data sources. Semistructured interviews with three small business owners were conducted to obtain the first set of data. The secondary data consisted of company profit and loss statements and yearly cash flow statements. I reached data saturation when the data became repetitive, and no additional information was added to the findings (Walker, 2012).

Three main themes emerged from the research findings after I coded and analyzed the data. I linked the analysis of each emergent theme back to the literature, the existing body of knowledge, and general systems theory. My findings of the study were clear in

suggesting that (a) great customer service, (b) building relationships, and (c) finding your passion may be necessary elements of the sustainability of small businesses beyond 10 years of being in business.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol and Questions

- I. Introduce self to participant(s).
- II. Present consent form, go over contents, and answer questions and concerns of participant(s).
- III. Give participant copy of consent form.
- IV. Turn on recording device.
- V. Follow procedure to introduce participant(s) with pseudonym/coded identification; note the date and time.
- VI. Begin interview with question #1; follow through to final question.
- VII. Follow up with additional questions.
- VIII. End interview sequence; discuss member-checking with participant(s).
- IX. Thank the participant(s) for their part in the study. Reiterate contact numbers for follow up questions and concerns from participants.
- X. End protocol.

### Interview Questions

1. What characteristics must a small business owner possess in order to operate a sustainable business?
2. What strategies have contributed to your ability to sustain your business and become profitable for the past 10 years?
3. What do you believe is the single most important characteristic a business owner must possess in order to create a sustainable business?
4. What business strategies have you used to run a profitable business?

5. Is there anything else you want to share concerning the sustainability of your small business?

## Appendix B: E-mail to Confirm Interview Transcript

Dear (Potential Participant's Name),

Thank you for your participation in my research study entitled "Small Business Strategies for Sustainability beyond 10 Years." I am emailing you to request your assistance in reviewing the transcript from our interview on (insert date).

I would like to speak with you within the next 72 hours to inquire if you have any changes to the transcript. Should this time frame not work for you please email me times that are more convenient for you in a reply to this e-mail.

Thank you again for your valuable time and participation.

Respectfully,

Gabriel E. Warren  
DBA Candidate  
Walden University

## Appendix C: Recruitment Letter for Study Participants

[Date]

Re: Small Business Strategies for Sustainability beyond 10 Years

Dear [Name]:

My name is Gabriel Warren and I am currently a doctoral candidate in Business Administration - Marketing at Walden University. I am conducting research on the necessary factors required for small business success in Birmingham, AL. The study is entitled: "Small Business Strategies for Sustainability beyond 10 Years." I am interested in conducting this study to explore some small business owner's effective strategies to improve new and existing business owner's chances of success beyond 10 years.

I am seeking face-to-face interviews with small business owners who meet the following criteria:

- Owner must be the original owner who started the company
- Business must be at least 10 years old
- Business must be currently operating as an organization within Birmingham, Alabama.

I developed the study selection criteria to assure that participants are likely to possess knowledge and information that are relevant to the purpose of this study. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time, even after I have completed data collection for the study. I will protect your identify, and your individual responses to interview questions will not be published or disclosed. All of your individual responses to questions will be recorded for analysis and reported in the study with no information that identifies you or your organization. I will share the findings from the study with study participants, other scholars, and the leaders within the participants' organizations.

I am requesting that you participate in my study. I will also contact you within the next 3 days to answer any questions that you may have and to ask for your participation. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Gabriel E. Warren  
DBA Candidate  
Walden University