



The Handwork Landscape: Birmingham, Alabama

Nest's Makers United Project
Issued September 2019





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Introduction

Nest's Makers United Project connects and strengthens community amongst the wide diversity of makers across the United States, building a vibrant and inclusive maker population. The project strives to identify and support makers who tend to face greater barriers to expanding their market reach as well as accessing business development services that stand to support growth. Leveraging the maker movement's potential to generate opportunity for all makers, regardless of sex, race, economic means, or physical ability, Makers United is committed to economic inclusion.

The Makers United Program kicked off in Spring 2019 in Birmingham, Alabama, a diverse cultural hub with a burgeoning creative economy and a local government who is putting concerted efforts behind supporting inclusive economic growth. Nest's goal was to embed itself in the Birmingham community, using focus groups and interviews with community leaders to identify the broad range of people in Birmingham engaging in some form of making with their hands.

To accomplish this, we partnered with the Birmingham-based firm Quire, whose team members are residents living in the Birmingham community. Collaborating hand in hand, we set out to meet and understand Birmingham's makers, even those working under-the-radar in far-from-obvious places—finding those who may not have fully considered themselves makers, yet who are nonetheless creating and earning an income from their craft. Outside of makerspaces and craft workshops, we searched for isolated pockets of making cut-off from mainstream resources and support networks. These are the makers we were most interested in understanding and bringing into the fold of opportunity.

Via a series of workshops organized by Nest, makers were invited to grow their knowledge and skills while connecting with others in their local communities. The workshops capitalized on Nest's unique position as a bridge between artisans and leading brands in the United States to connect a more diverse pool of US makers with opportunities to learn from seasoned brand professionals possessing expertise in marketing and branding, business planning, pricing, merchandising, design, and more. The workshops culminated with a local artisan showcase that invited consumers and retail buyers (nationally and locally) to view the range of craft talent and handcrafted product offerings coming out of the local community.

The following handwork landscape report provides critical insights into a Birmingham brimming with potential and helps to define, we believe for the first time, the city's rich maker community and its potential to thrive leveraging data driven insights. We hope you enjoy this descriptive report and look forward to sharing the impact of Nest's Makers United Project in Birmingham.

Nest's Approach and Methodology



To conduct its market landscape study of artisan makers in Birmingham, Alabama, Nest used a mixed-methods approach, collecting data both quantitatively through an online survey and qualitatively through in-person interviews and a formal focus group. This was a time-bound study focused during the period of March 2019 through mid-July 2019. The online survey was administered through Google forms targeting artisan makers within the Birmingham city limits through social media, email and personal outreach, and through diverse community collaborators and local networks. Participants were asked to self report data on their business structure, demographics, business performance, and barriers to growth. 103 artisan makers responded to the survey. Interviews were conducted with five local stakeholders in the fields of retail, business support, and other non-profit support services. The focus group was a three-hour session conducted with an intersection of makers and local community stakeholders, discussing challenges faced when starting a maker business, the resources they access, and how Birmingham can support raising the profile of makers.

Data collected from each individual maker was aggregated and analyzed to determine metrics representative of the wider sector. Data was also analyzed by subgroups to understand the key drivers of variation across the dataset. The following data presents a descriptive analysis representative of the total sample of 103 artisan maker survey respondents. In addition, the analysis includes qualitative insights gathered during the local stakeholder interviews and the single focus group.

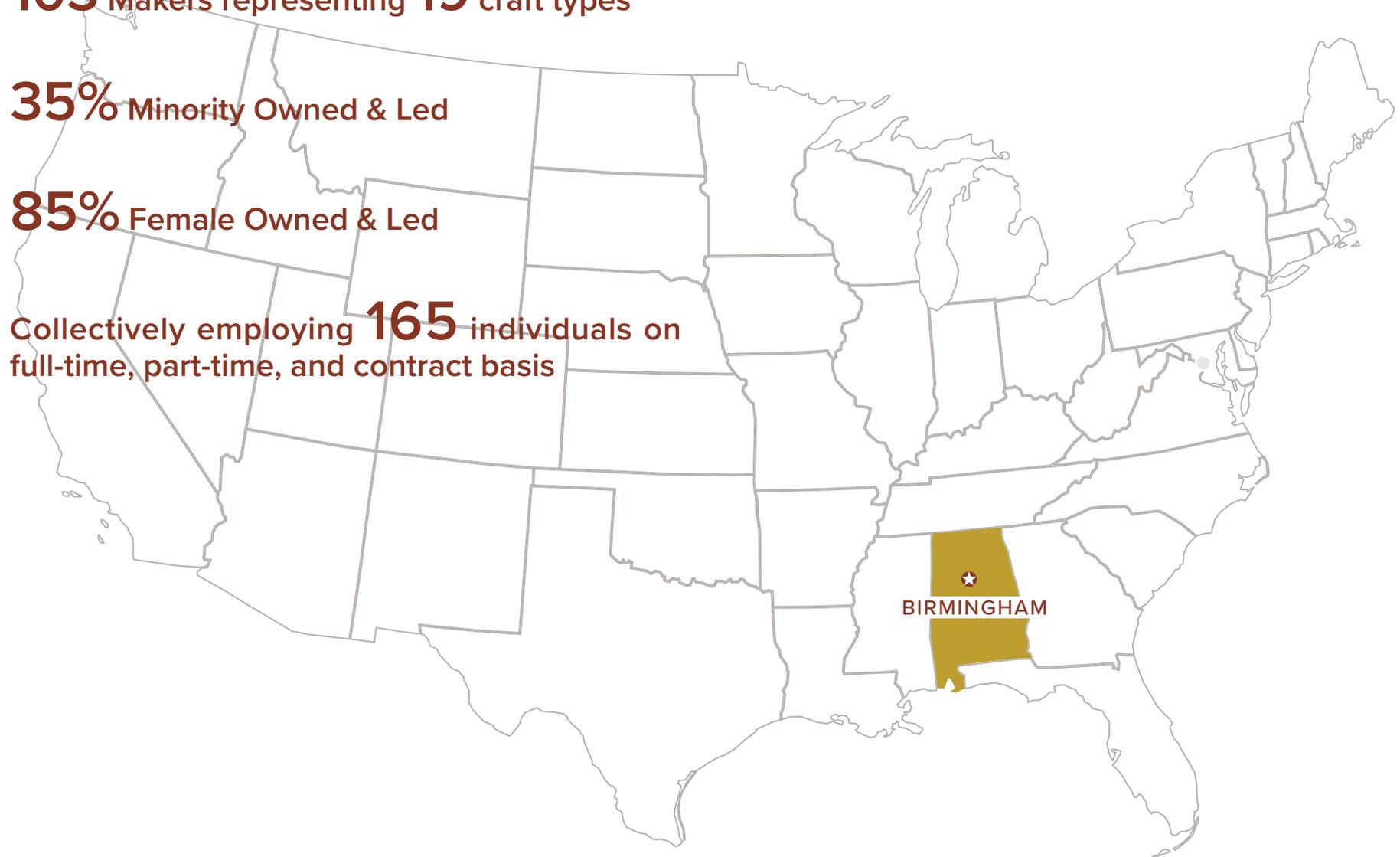
Small Business in Birmingham

103 Makers representing **19** craft types

35% Minority Owned & Led

85% Female Owned & Led

Collectively employing **165** individuals on full-time, part-time, and contract basis

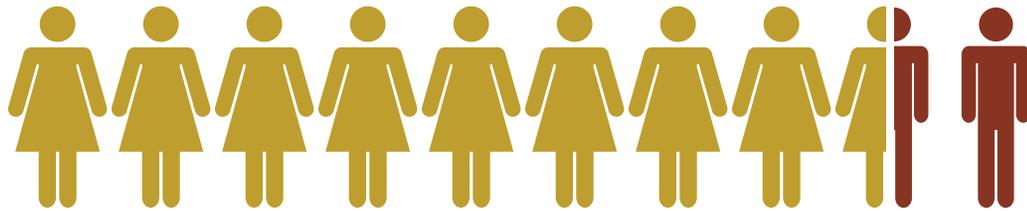


Who is a Birmingham Maker?

1

THE MAKER MOVEMENT IN BIRMINGHAM SEEMS TO BE DOMINATED BY WOMEN

Women comprised **85%** of participants in the Nest Landscape Mapping, suggesting that the maker population of Birmingham is largely dominated by women and those who identify as female.



2

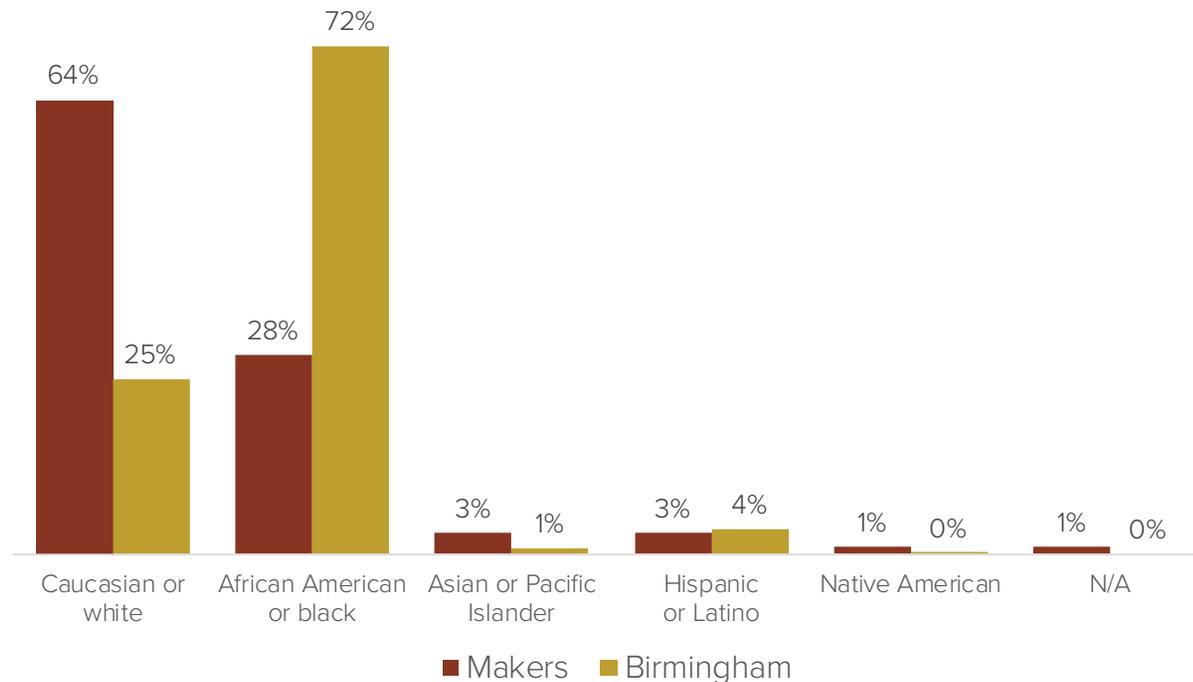
RACIAL DIVERSITY OF MAKERS DOES NOT SEEM TO MIRROR THE RACIAL COMPOSITION OF BIRMINGHAM

Makers who participated in Nest’s program were predominantly Caucasian or white (64%), followed by 28% of whom identified as black or African American. Few identified as Asian, Hispanic or Latino, or Native American.

While much of the current makers movement in the US features primarily Caucasian makers, Nest’s landscape mapping report identified a more diverse cross section of makers showing 35% of business being minority owned and led.

That said, the composition of respondents stands in contrast to the racial make up of Birmingham as a city. This suggests a need for deeper inclusivity in the current movement as well as potentially a lack of access to craft employment opportunities among racially diverse backgrounds.

Racial Composition of Birmingham Makers Compared to Overall Birmingham Population



On Growing Pains: Talaya Champion of Elidia the Label

“Personally, managing growth has been a challenge. I have two small children, three years and seven months old. I made a personal promise to never put work before my family, which means that I will find myself stopping in the middle of sewing to have a tea party—and sacrificing sleep at night so that I can complete my work. There came a point at which I was staying up throughout the night fulfilling orders and having a tough time keeping track of expenses. This is when I knew it was time to scale.

Each new phase has been a learning process. You set out to do something creative, and all of the sudden you find yourself with business challenges: weighing costs, getting licenses and figuring out how to employ people. That’s where I am right now. “

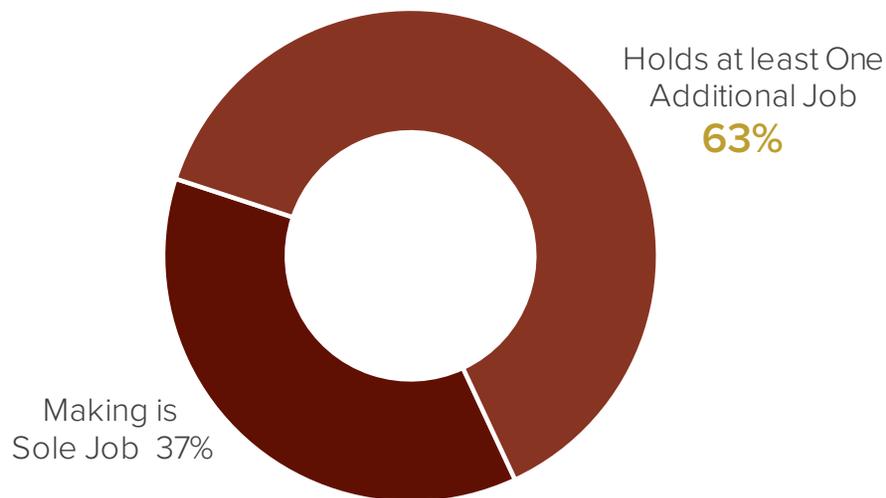


3

MAKERS OFTEN HAVE MULTIPLE SOURCES OF INCOME

In most cases, makers are part of a two-income household (68%) and many (63%) hold at least one other job in addition to making suggesting that additional support around access to financing may be critical to build an inclusive movement. Similar trends in the handwork economy are seen across the US and even globally. Capital financing continues to be a barrier for craft businesses to provide enough singular income for a maker.

Makers with Multiple Jobs



Percent of non full-time who want to shift to full-time making



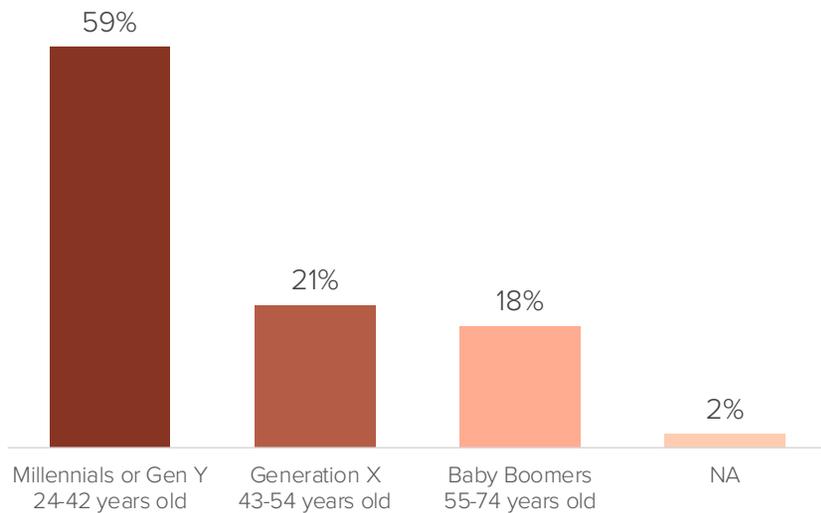
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MAKING IN BIRMINGHAM SKEWS YOUNG IN AGE AND BUSINESS YEARS

Approximately **40%** of the makers participating identified as being part of Generation X or older (43 years +). Nearly **60%** of respondents were between the ages of 24 and 42 showcasing the entrepreneurial spirit and employment opportunity of craft among a younger demographic.

In terms of age of the business, the vast majority were between **1 and 9 years old**

Percent of Makers by Age Range



Age of Business

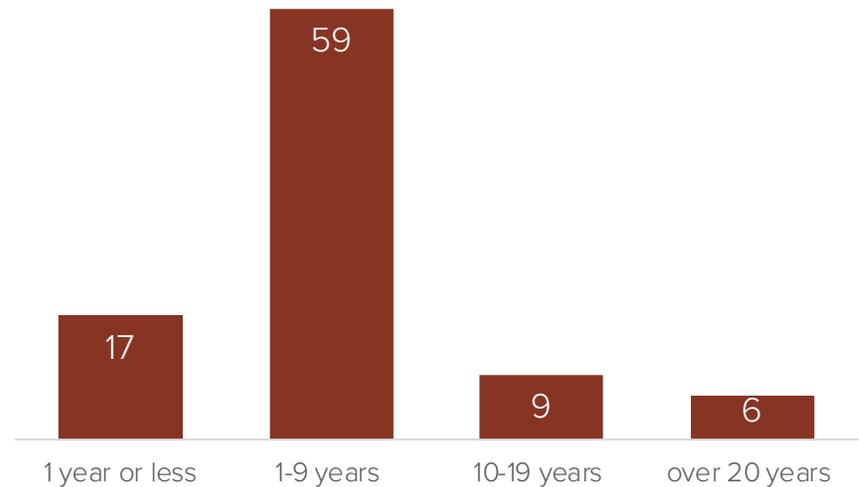




Photo Credit: Civil Stoneware



Photo Credit: California Country Organics

MEET SOME OF THE MAKERS



Photo Credit: Julie Maesele



Photo Credit: Meghan Howell

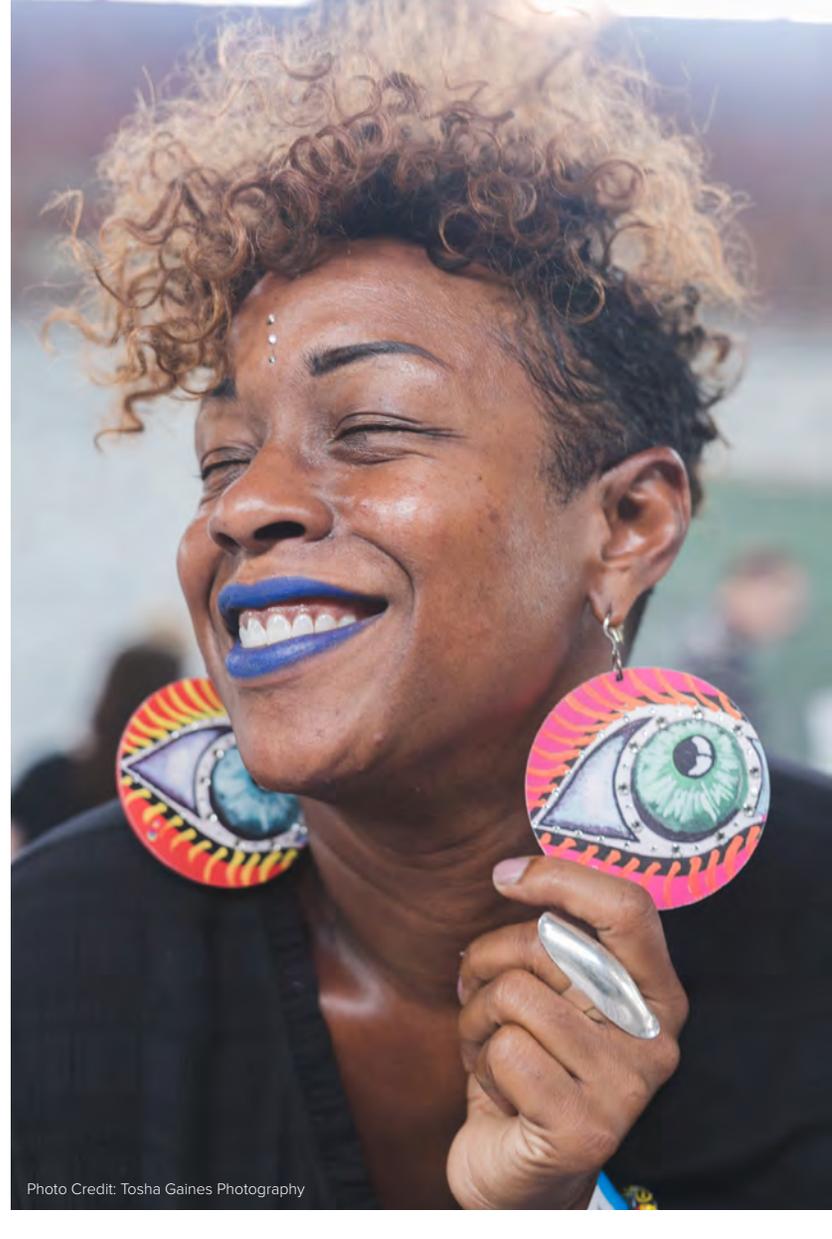


Photo Credit: Tosha Gaines Photography



Photo Credit: Elynn & Rose

Key Findings

1

MAKERS WEAR MANY HATS

Most **(56%)** makers in Birmingham are “**solopreneurs**” juggling the dual roles of both artisan and entrepreneur. Of those that identify as solopreneurs, **68%** also hold other jobs, pointing to the fact that craft is either not currently a sufficient source of income on its own, or that some makers view their crafts as hobbies done “on the side” as opposed to primary careers.

56% are Solopreneurs

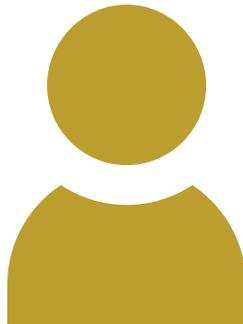


photo credits: Yogi Dada



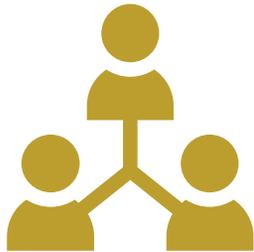
“The biggest challenge to operating as a solopreneur is maintaining the administrative, production, and financial demands of business while still finding time to create my one-of-a-kind designs.”—Yogi Dada

2

MAKERS LACK HUMAN RESOURCES

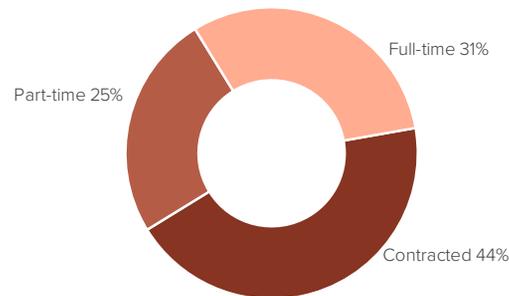
Less than half (**44%**) of the makers have additional staff, including not only full-time staff members, but also consultants and part-time employees, Racial minority makers are less likely to have staff (**46%** of Caucasian makers while only **35%** of African American makers) pointing to the need for makers to access creative options for human capital that is essential to scale. Given that **almost half** of the makers report being strapped for financial capital (the second largest stated need), which is critical for hiring, it may make sense to explore opportunities for makers to consider cost-sharing when it comes to hiring talent in the form of either part-time or full-time employees, as well as consultants.

44% of All Makers have Staff*



*Staff includes both full-time and part time employees

Breakdown of Employee Types



On the Word Maker: Bruce Lanier, Executive Director of MAKE Birmingham

“I think there’s actually a sort of language problem in this conversation. The term “maker,” and who and what we think about currently as makers and micro-enterprise, and so on, are fairly privileged discussions, you know?”

The maker discussion or movement is something that happens among people who are generally college educated, or moving in relatively affluent circles where there’s some disposable income. And this is a problem I had in Birmingham as far as our ecosystem goes. I know that the spirit of the movement is out there, but it takes different forms and different names. **Someone who did not come up through university education, may not have been exposed to this notion of “maker” or of social enterprise.**

But what is an analogous skillset or endeavor? **Would we consider somebody who’s really good at doing hair weaves a “maker?”** I’m sure there’s an art to it and certainly a business that can be built around it—and even a cultural quality to it. **But it’s not fashionable among the current definition of “maker”, so should this person be left out?”**



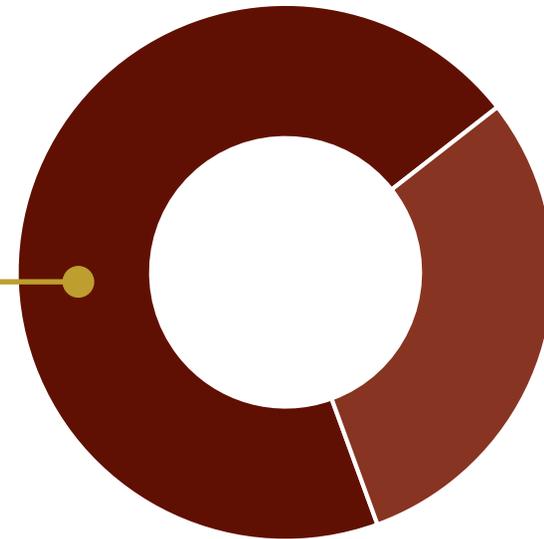
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NOT ALL MAKERS FEEL EQUALLY INCLUDED: A SENSE OF MAKER COMMUNITY IS LACKING

While most Caucasian, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American makers (**85%**) agree or strongly agree that Birmingham is a great place to start a creative business, fewer African American or Black makers (**65%**) feel that this is the case.

Most makers (**77%**), irrespective of racial self-identification, do not strongly agree with feeling connected to the people and resources that will help them grow their businesses pointing to a need for a stronger sense of community amongst Birmingham's makers.

**77% of Makers
Feel Disconnected
from Resources**



4

WE NEED A BROADER LEXICON

Maker? Artist? Entrepreneur? For Birmingham makers to realize the benefits of the maker movement, we may need to call them something else. Not all “makers” identify as such, which may be leaving behind important contributors to the so-called “maker movement.”

And while many makers think of themselves as artists (46%), nearly just as many call themselves entrepreneurs (42%), pointing once again between the dual roles of business owner and creative that most makers are juggling.

founder
executive director
entrepreneur
craftsperson
business owner
maker
creative
artisan
designer
artist
ceo



On Makers Inspiring Makers: Kyoka Akers (crocheter)

“When I first heard of Yogi Dada, she was heavy on the poetry scene and I thought she was super dope. It wasn’t until years later that I found out she designed her own earrings. Once we became friends, I began to see just how amazing she really was both as an artist and as a person. When it comes to her art, what she creates authentically represents her. I love how she’s not afraid to play with colors—that’s what inspires me the most—her fearlessness and drive to create bold and beautiful art that makes people feel good.”



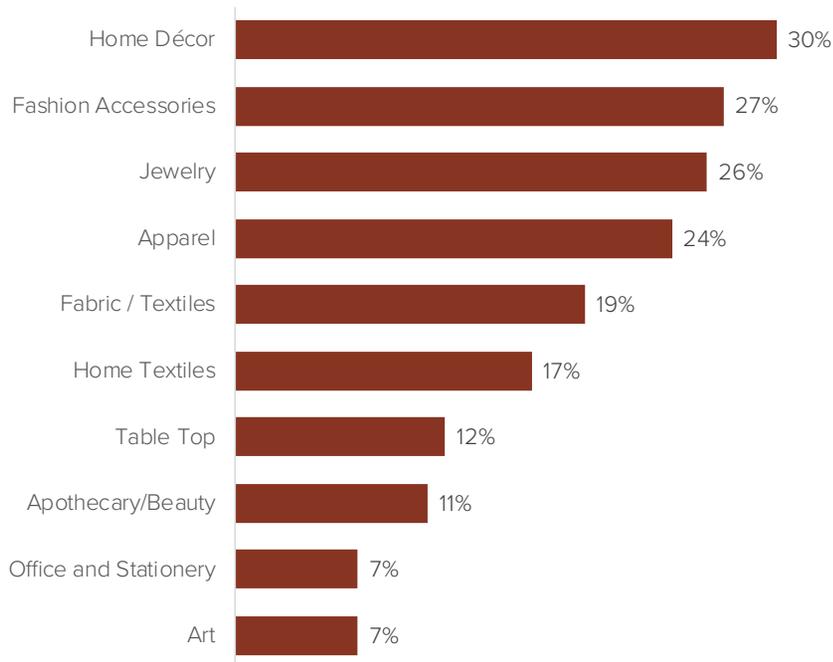
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ALL THE CRAFTS YOU CAN IMAGINE!

Collectively, Birmingham makers are a powerhouse of diverse product output! While home decor, fashion accessories, and jewelry lead the pack, Birmingham caters to a wide range of product categories. There is a huge opportunity for brands and retail buyers to embrace and explore the many access points for working with Birmingham’s makers.

What’s more? Quilting, crocheting, leather-working, illustration, metalworking, sewing, ceramic production, soap making and weaving, are all skills that Birmingham makers are picking up and putting in motion.

Top 10 Product Categories*



* several makers produce for more than one product category

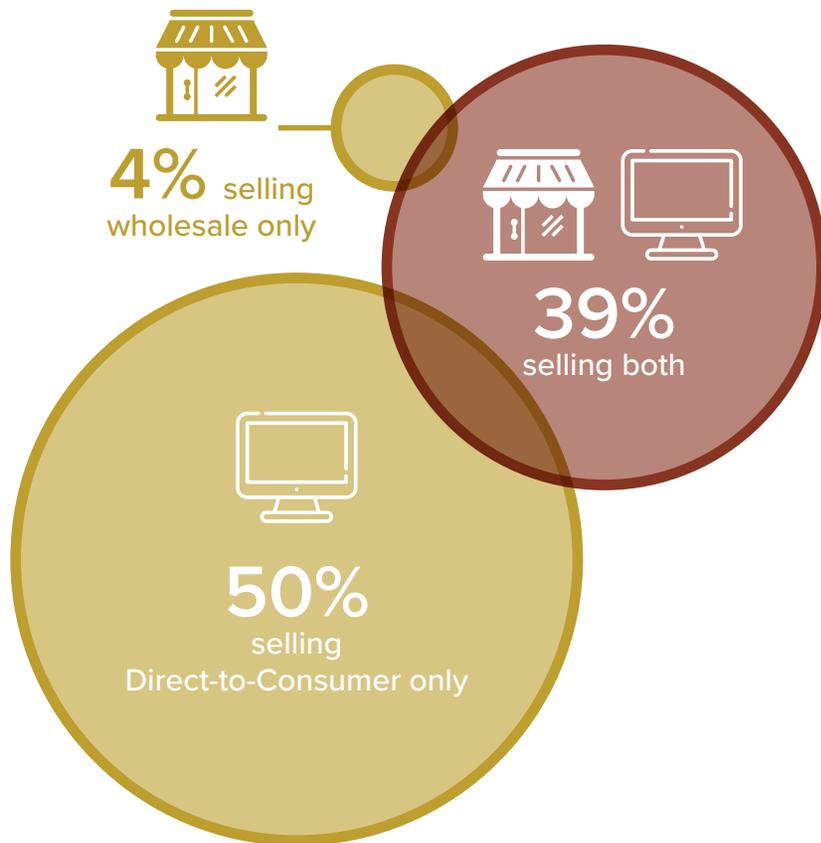
Top 10 Craft Types



6

BRANDS MAY BE MISSING AN OPPORTUNITY TO SOURCE FROM BIRMINGHAM MAKERS

Despite the diverse points of entry for brands to work with Birmingham makers (at a time when American Marketing Association reports that consumers are willing to pay up to 17% more for handcrafted items), fewer than half of makers **(43%)** sell wholesale. This points to a potential untapped opportunity for makers to be selling to brands and retailers.



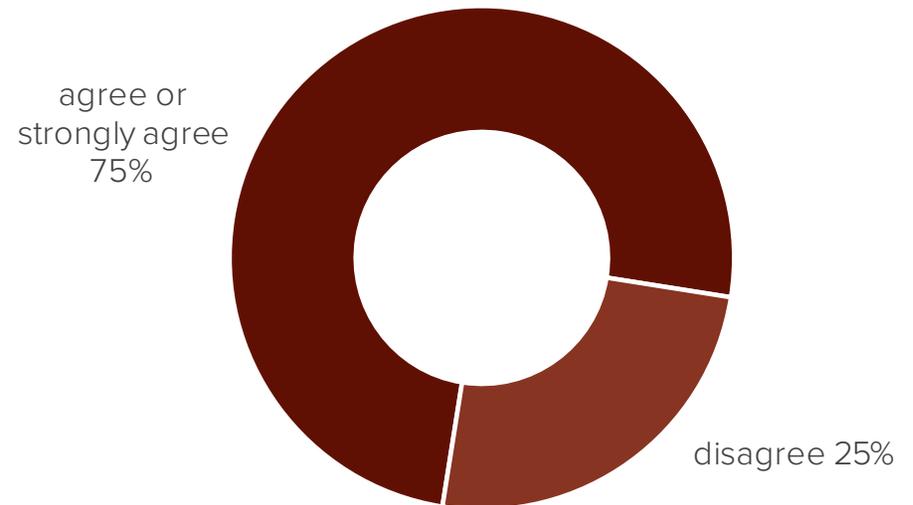
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THE CASE FOR BETTER MARKET ACCESS

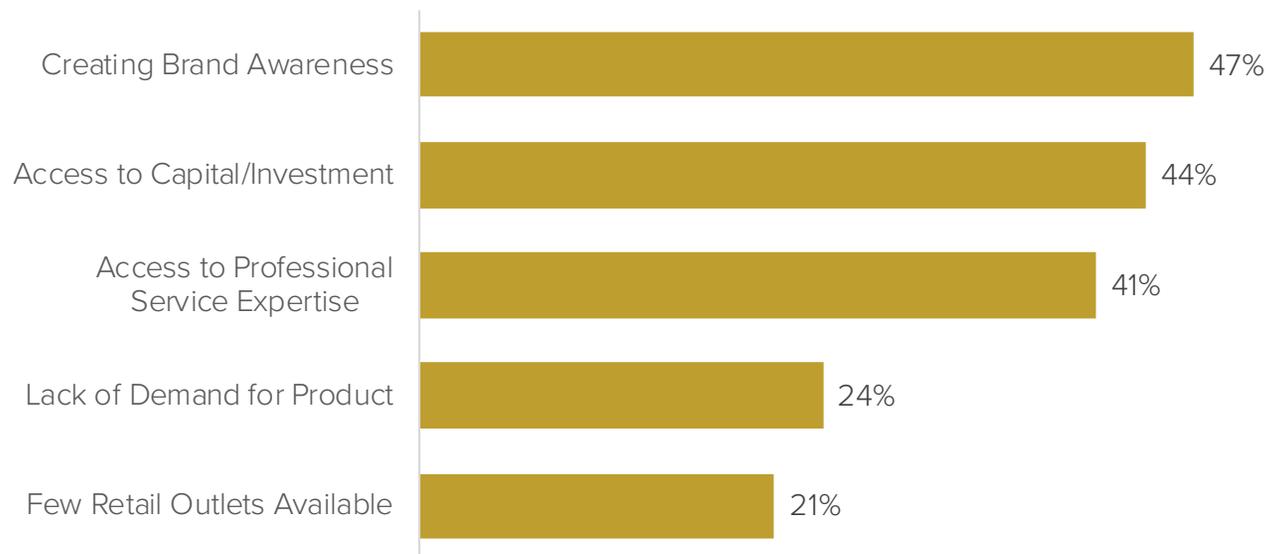
75% of makers perceive their target customer as someone who does not live in Birmingham, making it crucial for makers to have perspective outside of their city in order to support increased sales and business growth.

National brands can also be a conduit for better reaching target audiences. As **brand awareness** is the most frequently reported business need that Birmingham makers cite and that **“few retail outlets”** is the fifth most common business challenge reported, it seems likely that Birmingham makers are having trouble getting their brands in front of wholesalers and national brands.

Percent of Makers who Agree that their Customer is NOT in Birmingham



Top 5 Business Needs



Makers were able to select multiple needs

On Smart Scaling: Vince Schilleci of Freedom Soaps

“The most surprising thing about our industry is the number of soap companies in the market. There’s a fairly low barrier to entry to get started, but to grow into a regional or national brand, you have to have the resources to upgrade equipment and capacity to be able to fill orders in a timely manner. That being said, you have to be disciplined in your growth. Early on in your company’s life, it may be better to spend more on marketing to build brand awareness rather than buying all the fun toys for your workshop. After all, what good is fancy equipment and a large inventory with no customers to sell to?”



8

BIRMINGHAM MAKERS HAVE THE SAME NEEDS AS OTHER SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS

While all **(100%)** Birmingham makers cite business needs, such as marketing, selling online, and creating a business plan, only **23%** cite creative needs such as help with trend forecasting, quality control, or protecting their IP. This suggests that Birmingham makers would benefit from small business development programs that cater more broadly to the needs of small business owners, even if not specialized for entrepreneurs who also wear the creative “maker” or artist hat.

Despite the potential for Birmingham makers to benefit from small business development programs, **68%** of makers surveyed by Nest were not aware of **any** of the business/operation training resources available to them in Birmingham or Jefferson County. **This points to a gap in current business development and training programs and how they are reaching Birmingham makers.**



23%
Creative Needs



Photo Credits (L to R): Smallwoods Studios; YOGI DADA; Weavhet; Meghan Howell; Elynn & Rose



The majority of makers (**84%**) are using at least some digital tools to sell their products, but most of the makers overall (**63%**) are doing this in concert with in-person selling.

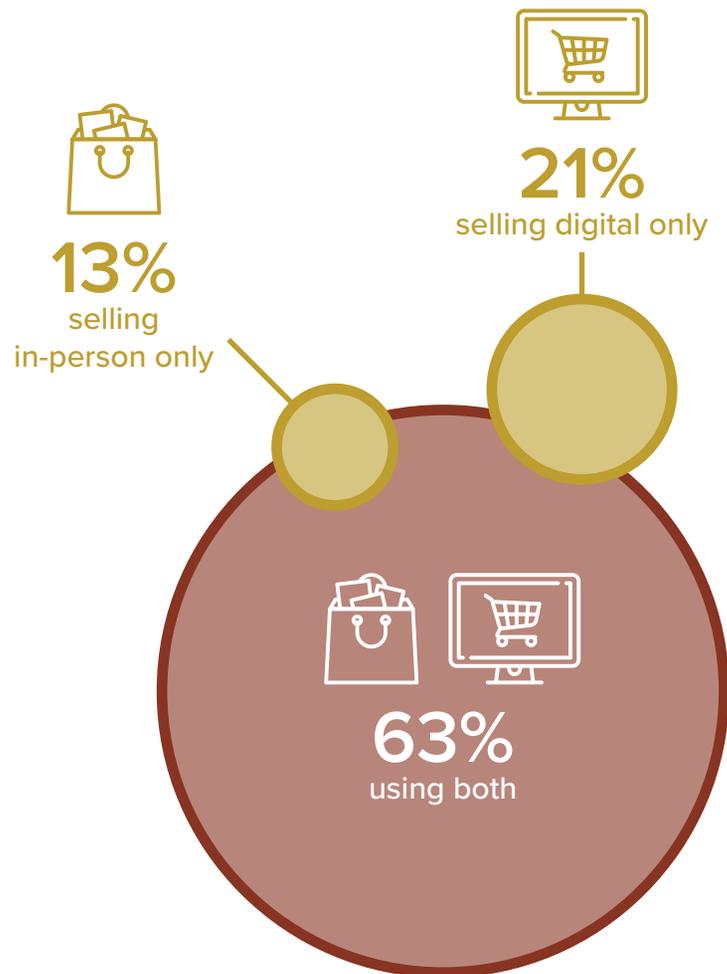


Photo Credits: YOGI DADA



Photo Credits: Elynn & Rose



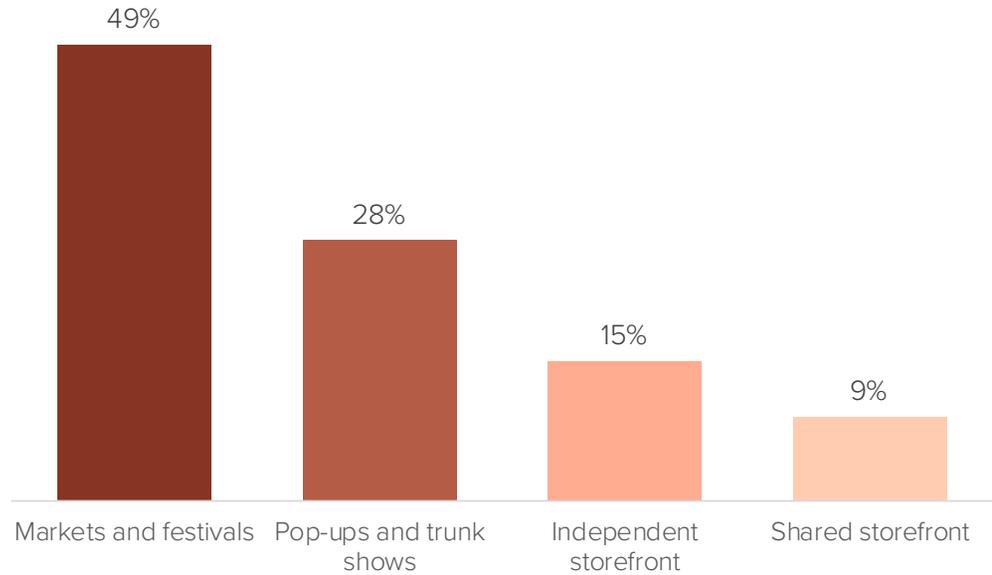
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FAIRS AND INSTAGRAM ARE HELPING MAKERS SELL

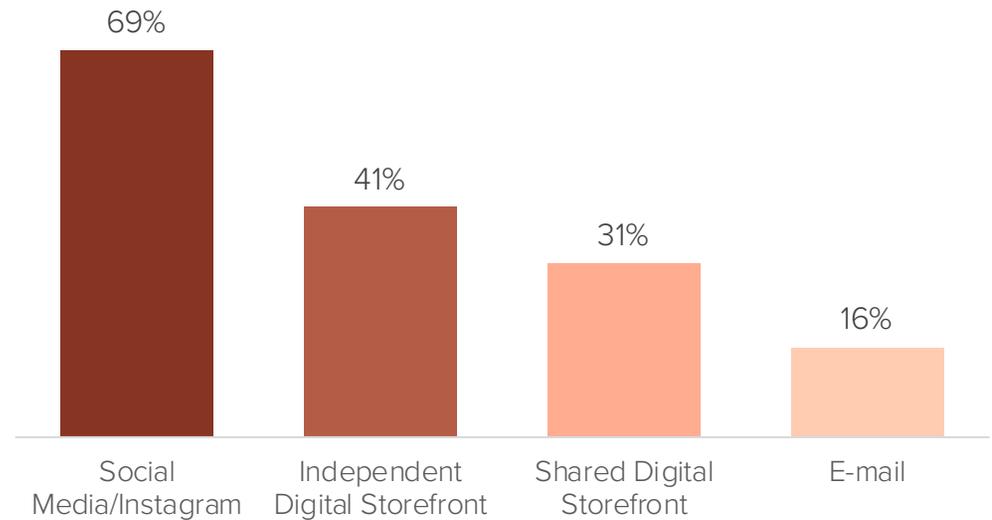
The primary way that makers are selling in person is through fairs (markets and festivals), with nearly half of makers (**49%**) selling their products at fairs. Digitally, Instagram is the primary selling channel used with **46%** of makers utilizing Instagram to sell their products.



Most Common In-person Selling Platforms Utilized



Most Common Digital Selling Platforms Utilized



On Making as Economically Sustaining: Mallory Barnett, Elements

“I feel like people like to talk about [supporting makers], but I’m not sure if they’re connecting their wallets to their mouths. So I think that the movement to support smaller, and not just go through the big box [like] Amazon is there—and it’s growing—but I’m not sure it is materializing quite in a way [such] that all makers could sustain themselves with just [making alone]. Most of the makers I know have full-time jobs—or at least serious part-time jobs. And [making] a side-hustle because they love doing it, but it can’t necessarily support them on its own.”



Photo Credits: Elements



Photo Credits: Julie Maesele



Photo Credits: California Country Organics



Photo Credits: Sharon Welton Glass



Photo Credits: Flowertea Farmstead

A SAMPLING OF MAKER PRODUCTS



Photo Credits: Civil Stoneware



Photo Credits: el.en Collection



Photo Credits: Elidia the Label

Where We Go From Here

Nest's main objectives for this landscape mapping were to 1) gain critical insights into the maker landscape of Birmingham; 2) understand the opportunities and challenges to growing this sector, and 3) bring visibility to underrepresented makers and the challenges they face.

Beyond maker mapping, Nest also completed a robust local resource mapping, identifying over 40 maker sales events as well as 30 agencies and organizations that can support local makers. These resources included maker spaces, local boutiques, education providers, membership organizations, training services, and financing access.

The following key insights were gleaned from conversations with local resource partners to identify what was currently available to makers and where Nest could provide the most value to the community:

- ▶ Local resources are marketed in a way that makes them appear more geared towards tech and food enterprises, limiting their inclusion of maker-based businesses
- ▶ There is a major gap in identifying makers in underserved communities—currently many local programs are not reaching the communities most in need of support
- ▶ Training and education programs are predominately facilitated by local experts—there is a need to supplement these programs with trainings that are led by national brands and retailers outside of Birmingham

These and other insights highlighted in our report informed the design of capacity building clinics and market access strategies, which were implemented during the Summer and Fall of 2019.

Nest's Makers United project was designed to help address the existing gaps discussed in this report; namely, inclusivity, business development support, and marketplace access that Birmingham makers seem to face. It is our hope that the findings of this report will help spur similar initiatives to strengthen the Birmingham maker movement and its potential to generate wide-reaching, inclusive economic opportunity.

To learn more about Nest's Maker United Project, please visit buildanest.org

Acknowledgments

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