

Zuckerberg nears end of US tour, wants to boost small biz

November 9 2017, by Barbara Ortutay



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg takes a selfie with a group of entrepreneurs and innovators after taking part in a roundtable discussion at Cortex Innovation Community technology hub, Thursday, Nov. 9, 2017, in St. Louis. Zuckerberg was in St. Louis to announce a program to boost small businesses and bolster individual technical skills both on and off Facebook. (AP Photo/Jeff Roberson)

What's Mark Zuckerberg's biggest takeaway as he wraps up a year of travel to dozens of U.S. states? The importance of local communities.

"Most of the discussion we have nationally is about what the government should do, or to some degree what families should do," the Facebook CEO said in an interview. "People don't spend that much time talking about community, and I think probably that's the most important part of people's support structure."

To this end, Zuckerberg is announcing a program to boost small businesses and bolster individual technical skills both on and off Facebook. The move shows how intertwined Facebook has become not just in our social lives, but in entrepreneurs' economic survival and growth.

Facebook says more than 70 million small businesses use its service. Only 6 million of them advertise.

"If this were purely about our ad business or something like that, I probably wouldn't be the primary person talking about it," Zuckerberg said. "But because we are kicking off this whole program that I think is going to be critical to the whole mission focusing on building community, I thought it was an important thing to do."

Facebook wouldn't say how many of its own employees will be participating in the Community Boost program, which will "visit" 30 U.S. cities next year and offer people free training on a range of digital skills. Those will include coding, building websites and—naturally—using Facebook for their business.



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg laughs as he meets with a group of entrepreneurs and innovators during a roundtable discussion at Cortex Innovation Community technology hub, Thursday, Nov. 9, 2017, in St. Louis. Zuckerberg was in St. Louis to announce a program to boost small businesses and bolster individual technical skills both on and off Facebook. (AP Photo/Jeff Roberson)

The company has launched a smaller version of the program in Detroit, where it is paying to train 3,000 people in digital skills through a local group called Grand Circus.

Zuckerberg said he thinks these are some "specific things" Facebook can do to help boost the economy and small businesses, "both because it's going to be good for our products and business and because it's going to be good for this mission of building a community even beyond our own interests."

Last week, Facebook's top lawyer testified in Congress along with

executives from Google and Twitter on Russia's use of online services to meddle with the 2016 U.S. elections. Between that and concerns that Facebook has encouraged political polarization and the spread of fake news, it's been a tough year for the company. Amid the turmoil, Zuckerberg has renewed his public focus on making Facebook a force for good in the world.



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg meets with a group of entrepreneurs and innovators during a roundtable discussion at Cortex Innovation Community technology hub, Thursday, Nov. 9, 2017, in St. Louis. Zuckerberg was in St. Louis to announce a program to boost small businesses and bolster individual technical skills both on and off Facebook. (AP Photo/Jeff Roberson)

The 33-year-old CEO has spent the past year visiting states he hadn't been to yet to learn more from regular people and local communities—stopping by an opioid treatment center, an oil rig and a

seafood processing plant along the way. He has two more states left, Kansas and Missouri. Zuckerberg was in St. Louis on Thursday to announce the program, which will also touch down in Houston, Greenville, South Carolina and other cities.

While the tour has sometimes borne a resemblance to a political campaign—Zuckerberg has made a point of meeting with a cross-section of Americans and listening to their concerns—he's deflected any suggestions of a presidential run.



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg smiles as he talks with Felicia Shaw during a roundtable discussion of entrepreneurs and innovators at Cortex Innovation Community technology hub, Thursday, Nov. 9, 2017, in St. Louis. Zuckerberg was in St. Louis to announce a program to boost small businesses and bolster individual technical skills both on and off Facebook. (AP Photo/Jeff Roberson)

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