

Case study: Akervall Technologies

Launched in 2009, Akervall Technologies provides mouthguards for athletes and nocturnal teeth grinders. The Ann Arbor-based company entered the Pure Michigan Business Connect Economic Gardening Network in late 2014, which enabled it to work with the National Strategic Research Team (NSRT). Among key objectives, CEO Sassa Akervall says she wanted to gain a clearer understanding of her market, competitors and potential areas for growth.

In response, the NSRT created geographic maps that compared Akervall Technologies' current customer base with demographics for consumers and athletic teams. The maps revealed where the company already had a strong presence — and where it could target more retailers to distribute its mouthguard products.

The results were extremely helpful, says Rita Shelley, the company's director of marketing, who participated in the Economic Gardening engagement along with Akervall. "We saw that our biggest presence was on the West Coast," she explains. "Yet the East Coast is a hotbed of sports activity, and we realized that we need to focus more there. In addition, we saw that our presence in the Midwest could be strengthened."



Akervall Technologies' management team (left to right): Terry Rishoi, Rita Shelley, Sassa Akervall, Sebastian Jolta and Lynne Schwank.

As a result, Akervall Technologies has identified several regional athletic trade shows it will attend — and the company has hired two additional salespeople and a marketing assistant to make use of the research findings.

Another major decision that resulted from the Economic Gardening engagement was to split marketing efforts for the company's SISU athletic mouthguards and its SOVA nighttime grinding mouthguards. "We had been going back and forth on this for some time because the athletic market initially drove sales for SOVA," explains Akervall. "But now that we have a better understanding of our customer demographics, we see SOVA has more potential to fly solo. It was a little scary to let go of the reins on that, which is why it was important to have tangible research that backed up our gut feelings."

Other assistance the NSRT provided Akervall Technologies included:

- Analyzing the company's website. Since its engagement, Akervall Technologies has invested in a major redesign, using bright colors to create a more dynamic look for its SISU brand — a sharp contrast to competitors who typically use dark colors, Akervall says. (A separate website for SOVA is in the planning stages.)

Case study: Akervall Technologies

- Identifying online watering holes that attract potential SISU and SOVA customers, which will help the company be more strategic with online marketing efforts.
- Market research that quantified the current size of the athletic mouthguard market, along with projected growth. Based on this data, Akervall Technologies has targeted field hockey and lacrosse as markets where it wants to increase penetration (the company initially established a stronghold in the roller derby market).

In 2014 Akervall Technologies generated about \$1.5 million in revenue, and the company expects to hit \$3 million in 2015. Leveraging information they received from Economic Gardening will play a critical role in achieving that increase, say Avervall and Shelley.

“The information was like a security blanket of sorts,” says Shelley. “As a small growing business you’re constantly rushing and trying to achieve multiple goals. There’s a feeling of ‘Are we doing everything right? Can we do everything we want to do?’ Economic Gardening helped give us answers. In some cases, it was a confirmation that we were doing things right; in other cases, the answers were eye-openers. But either way, we received exactly what we needed to grow strategically.”

“It really cleared up the fog,” Akervall agrees. The process was also very smooth, she adds. “Calls were scheduled way in advance, and they were short, intense meetings that didn’t last more than 30 minutes. Everyone was held accountable; we didn’t have a meeting unless there was something to discuss. The amount and quality of information was just amazing. We were doing a happy dance every time we talked to the research team.”



The National Center for Economic Gardening is a partnership between the Edward Lowe Foundation and Chris Gibbons. NCEG helps state and regional organizations establish Economic Gardening networks, delivers Economic Gardening services and maintains national standards in training and certification. To learn more, visit www.edwardlowe.org.