

Case study: Grand Traverse Pie Co.

Since its launch in 1996, Grand Traverse Pie Co. has been making lives sweeter for its customers, and by 2017 the Traverse City, Michigan-based company was generating annual revenue of more than \$25 million. In addition to 16 retail locations, GT Pie has an online division that generates about 8 percent of its revenue. Wanting to boost this slice of business, GT Pie entered Michigan's statewide Economic Gardening program in fall 2017. This enabled president Mike Busley and co-owner Tim Rice to work with the National Strategic Research Team (NSRT), a cadre of experts at the National Center for Economic Gardening that provides customized information to help second-stage companies grow larger and become more profitable.



Grand Traverse Pie president Mike Busley holds one of his company's bestsellers: Apple Crumb with Caramel and Pecans.

Dovetailing their expertise in sophisticated databases, geographic information systems (GIS), search-engine optimization and web marketing, the NSRT executed a variety of analytical tasks. The primary goal was to help GT Pie better understand who its existing online customers were — and where to find more like them. With that in mind, the researchers:

- Created geographic maps that visualized the locations of GT Pie customers by metro area and county across the United States over both a 10-year period and the most recent 12 months.
- Evaluated those buyers by Tapestry segmentation to identify common demographic, socioeconomic and behavioral characteristics and rank the ones most apt to indulge their sweet tooth. Then, maps were created to indicate where potential new customers could be targeted.
- Leveraged census migration data to determine other places Michigan natives retire or relocate to, such as Florida or Arizona — places where expatriates might be hungry for a taste of home.
- Created online marketing strategies to help GT Pie connect with prospective customers, including suggestions of location, age and keywords to use in Google ads.
- Conducted research on Millennials' pie-purchasing behavior.

“This in-depth research is enabling GT Pie to tailor its messaging to different groups of customers for the first time,” Busley says. “What’s more, the researchers opened our eyes on ways to use different online channels to find corporate customers. For example, there may be Michigan State University alumni associations in other states that we can find through Facebook — and then approach them about corporate gift-giving.”

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“The 2018 holiday season will be a real test of what we’ve learned,” he adds, explaining that GT Pie wrapped up its Economic Gardening engagement in November 2017, which didn’t leave a lot of time to implement the research findings and affect fourth-quarter sales.

Yet Busley gives Economic Gardening a hearty thumbs-up. “The credibility and experience of the NSRT is a plug-and-go,” he says. “It was much more efficient than saying ‘we need an SEO person, we need a GIS person, we need a market analysis person’ and trying to contract with individual experts.”

“Even if we knew what expertise we needed, we wouldn’t have known how to pursue them, especially when it comes to social media marketing,” he adds. “We could have spent a ton of money and gotten conflicting information. Instead, our Economic Gardening engagement was well-thought-out and well-coordinated.”

Busley also appreciates the collaborative nature of the program. The researchers weren’t telling us what to do, we were working together with them,” he says. “Even early in the engagement, we felt we were with the right people — and that they were giving us relevant information.”



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.