

Case study: QDS Systems in Baton Rouge

Specializing in factory automation, QDS Systems is an engineering company that provides systems integration services to a wide range of industrial clients, from wastewater treatment to petrochemical. The Baton Rouge-based company entered Louisiana's statewide Economic Gardening network in 2016, then went through a second round in 2017. These engagements gave QDS access to the National Strategic Research Team (NSRT), a cadre of experts with the National Center for Economic Gardening.

In the first engagement, the NSRT engaged in a variety of activities, from researching industries that might be looking to increase plant automation to analyzing QDS' website and competitors. "The digital marketing assistance was probably one of the most helpful things from the first round," says Stan Prutz, CEO of QDS. "We were rebuilding our website, and the researchers gave us a lot of direction on how to improve its design and how to get the best bang from our buck in that space."

During the second round of Economic Gardening, the NSRT focused on marketing one of QDS' newer products: a class of robotic arms that can work alongside people and perform such tasks as assembly, painting, screwdriving, labeling, injection molding, welding, packaging, polishing, stacking and more. "Collaborative robotics is a small part of our business right now...maybe a couple of percentage points," Prutz says. "Yet we believe it could represent more than 50 percent of revenue within four years."

Prutz points to government reports that estimate retiring Baby Boomers will result in a shortage of two million manufacturing workers within the next few years. "Manufacturers are trying to find ways to automate so they're not as dependent on hiring people," he says. "Collaborative robotics enables manufacturers to redesign workflow so more intellectually challenging tasks are given to people, while repetitive tasks go to robots. Doing the same thing over and over again causes humans to become bored and disengaged, but is something that robots are really good at."

Yet because there isn't a lot of awareness for collaborative robotics, marketing was a challenge for Prutz. In response, the NSRT:

- Leveraged geographic information system (GIS) tools to provide a list of Louisiana manufacturers that could reduce labor costs by introducing collaborative robotics into their operations. These prospects were also mapped to show their geographic concentration by parish.



Stan Prutz, CEO of QDS Systems, with a collaborative robot from Universal Robotics including Robotiq gripper, force sensor and vision system.

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- Used social media tools, including Indeed.com, to find companies that need many people to perform repetitive tasks — and might benefit from collaborative robots.
- Explored online marketing strategies using LinkedIn as a platform to find and connect with potential customers.

“The second round produced a better list of prospects — largely because we were able to give the researchers more direction on what we were looking for,” Prutz observes. “One big takeaway, we realized that Louisiana was too small a target and we needed to cast a larger net for customers.”

Armed with new insights from his Economic Gardening engagements, Prutz expects to double QDS’ annual revenue to \$7 million within five years.

“Before Economic Gardening, we never had a marketing program — in fact, we could hardly spell the word,” Prutz says. “Now we have a primer to understand GIS, SEO, website optimization and social media.”

“Once we got a basic knowledge about how these things are done, we could start developing an ongoing program and put a budget to it,” he continues. “Now we’ve engaged three external partners to help with marketing. One is a direct mail specialist who compiled a nationwide list using criteria similar to the Louisiana list we got from Economic Gardening, and we’ve had some success with this.”

In addition to the deliverables from Economic Gardening, Prutz praises the structure of the program. “I really liked the pace,” he says. “It didn’t drag on, and it was self-directed, which was important. The researchers focused on what we asked for.”

“It was also highly enlightening,” he adds. “Everything we covered in Economic Gardening — GIS, SEO, social media — is something that small businesses should be doing — and probably aren’t. Economic Gardening raised our awareness in areas we were lacking. It’s important to know what you don’t know.”



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.