

## Case study: SVO Group Inc.

Alex Foris has a message for Governor Pence: “All second-stage companies in Indiana should go through Economic Gardening.”

Co-founder of the SVO Group Inc., a manufacturer of highly customized Class B recreational vehicles and commercial vans, Foris entered the Elevate Ventures Economic Gardening Program in May 2015. Within a few months the Elkhart-based company more than doubled its staff from six to 14 employees and significantly increased revenue — growth that Foris attributes, in part, to the Economic Gardening engagement.

Among Foris’ key takeaways were:

*The significance of social media marketing* — “I’m not high-tech, but in today’s world, you have to have an understanding of social media and how to use it,” Foris says. “And if you don’t know how, find someone that does.” Foris chose the latter and hired a local marketing firm, Media One, to build and maintain a Facebook page for his company. The payoff: Within a couple of months, the Facebook page generated two new customers. The SVO Group is now expanding into Class C shuttle buses, and Foris plans to launch a separate website and social media initiative for this division.

*Using SIC codes and GIS mapping for customer leads* — A large share of SVO Group’s custom vans are sold to a very niche market: companies that make or repair surgical instruments for hospitals. Foris’ business partner, Terry Minix, already knew this industry, which paved the way for initial clients in Indiana. “Yet the GIS mapping helped us focus on where we should go next,” Foris says. “For example, we saw opportunities in nearby Tennessee and Kentucky where cities are growing.”



From top down: Terry Minix and Alex Foris, co-founders of the SVO Group Inc. in Elkhart, Indiana. Exterior and interior shots of a custom van for a surgical instrument repair client.

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“The researchers opened our eyes to the different categories of businesses that use vans, where they are located and how to drill down by SIC codes to see where to put our efforts,” Foris continues. “Someone may deliver oxygen and hospital supplies — but they don’t need a complex, self-contained van like we produce.”

In addition to finding leads for new customers, Foris says he got new ideas for marketing to existing customers.

The SVO Group isn’t Foris’ first rodeo as a business owner. A serial entrepreneur, he sold a minibus manufacturing company in 2012 after growing it to more than 50 employees. Yet Economic Gardening was a real help, he says. “The researchers have a fresh set of eyes and can point you to opportunities you never thought of before.”



*Exterior and interior shots of a customized consumer van.*



*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](http://www.edwardlowe.org).*