

## Case study: Southern Designs

*A manufacturer of home décor items based in Vidalia, Louisiana, Southern Designs LLC sells primarily through third-party online retailers, but also directly to consumers from its [website](#). Wanting to increase this direct B2C portion of his business, CEO Tance Hughes entered Louisiana's statewide Economic Gardening program in 2017, which gave him access to the National Strategic Research Team (NSRT).*

**Research deliverables** — NSRT members first analyzed the company's website, looking for ways to improve search engine optimization, navigation and usability; then they benchmarked how Southern

Design's social media presence compared with its competitors. Next, the researchers studied Southern Designs' current online customers to identify their geographic locations, along with demographic and psychographic characteristics. Then, leveraging geographic information system (GIS) technology, they located similar consumers across the country and created heat maps to show the concentration of these potential buyers.

**Key insights** — Some of the maps were surprising, admits Hughes. For example, there were more potential customers in Minnesota than he realized, along with communities in Virginia and rural Kentucky. "We knew we did OK in these areas, but the research showed we could beef up our marketing efforts," he explains. More important, the data revealed that Southern Designs' customer base was more affluent than expected: Instead of average house income falling between \$50,000 to \$75,000 as Hughes thought, data showed his buyers' household income was \$75,000 and up.

**More bang for ad bucks** — "This may not seem like a big difference, but it really helps you get a better ROI from your advertising spend," Hughes says. "We took that data and ran with it. Now when creating Facebook ads, which is our primary ad spend, we're better able to target prospective customers in terms of geographic area and income, along with their interests."

Indeed, armed with the Economic Gardening data, Southern Designs broke its single-day sales record four times in the fourth quarter of 2017. In January 2018, sales were up 65 percent from the previous year with a 30 percent increase in February. What's more, within a few months of wrapping up its Economic Gardening engagement, Southern Designs more than doubled its Facebook page presence from 30,000 to 60,000 followers.



*Tance Hughes founded Southern Designs at age 17 while still in high school.*

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**Brick-and-mortar surprise** — Southern Designs also used data and insights from its Economic Gardening engagement to help win a contract with Walmart, business Hughes expects to bolster annual revenue by 4 percent. “When we met with their buyers, we were able to say ‘here’s where we think our products fit, and this is what customers are looking for,’” Hughes says.

**Additional feedback** — “The Economic Gardening engagement really helped focus and target our marketing efforts,” Hughes says. “I would recommend Economic Gardening to any company that’s trying to grow. It’s not a cookie-cutter, ‘here’s-what-you-need-to-do’ sort of program. Rather, you tell the researchers about your challenges and they work with you, creating a custom plan to help achieve growth objectives.”



*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).*