

Case study: Waitr Inc.

“Economic Gardening changed our market expansion efforts from being a guessing game to having clarity where there was a high likelihood of success,” said Chris Meaux, CEO of Waitr Inc., a software company that enables restaurants to provide delivery service through a smart phone app.

Waitr entered Louisiana’s statewide Economic Gardening program March 2016. At that time the Lake Charles-based company was in three markets. “We had a list of target cities we were considering, but wanted to get more information before pulling the trigger,” said Meaux, who co-founded Waitr in late 2013 with Evan Diaz de Arce, Addison Killebrew, Adam Murnane and Manuel Rivero.

Waitr differs from competitors by enabling restaurants to run analytics, streamline kitchen flow, change menu items and pricing on the fly, gain insights into customers and assist with online marketing activities. “We’ve built a platform that goes beyond merely enabling orders to facilitating additional growth for restaurants,” said Meaux, noting the company beta-tested its software app in 2014 and then formally launched in 2015. “We had a proven business model, but we needed to know how to expand it.”

That’s where Economic Gardening came in. Louisiana’s program, hosted by Louisiana Economic Development (LED), gave Waitr access to the National Strategic Research Team (NSRT), a cadre of subject-matter experts at the National Center for Economic Gardening. Meaux asked the researchers to analyze potential markets in a dozen southeastern states.

“Waitr wanted to enter markets where there was either little or no competition — but still large enough to make it worthwhile,” said Mike Lambert, one of the NSRT members who worked on the engagement. Using sophisticated GIS mapping tools, Lambert identified 222 cities in 12 states that met Waitr’s population requirements. Then he overlaid the location of competitors on those target cities and ranked them according to desirable consumer demographics and psychographic data. No cake walk, this involved appending massive amounts of data to the maps along with enhancements like color-coding so they could be read easily.



Waitr co-founders: Evan Diaz de Arce, Manuel Rivero, Chris Meaux and Adam Murnane (standing) and Addison Killebrew (sitting).

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“The Waitr team was very engaged, which was key,” added Lambert. “They were willing to be interactive and iterative, which really helped us provide the right information to achieve their goals.”

“The Economic Gardening data opened our eyes up to the types of markets we needed to focus on,” Meaux said. “The research identified a number of markets where we could enter and either be the sole player or the largest player and capture market share ahead of competitors.”

Although the research confirmed some cities Waitr was already considering, it also produced quite a few surprises. “For example, Gulf Port, Mississippi, wasn’t on our target list, but turned out to be a perfect demographic fit for our product,” said Meaux. “Tuscaloosa, Alabama, was another market that we moved into right after we saw the data.”

Toward the end of the engagement, Meaux also asked the researchers to look at Sacramento, California. “We had just acquired a technology company there to enhance our app,” he explained. “Now that we had an office in Sacramento, it made sense to investigate that market.”

Within six months of completing its Economic Gardening engagement, Waitr had opened 13 new markets, including Sacramento. Another 24-30 market launches are slated by the end of 2017.

“The Economic Gardening program saved us time and money in our expansion efforts and resulted in stronger markets,” says Meaux. “Each launch has been successful — and we’ve been able to bring them up faster and easier.” In fact, when Waitr compared its first three markets to new ones selected from the Economic Gardening data, analytics showed the new ones were growing 400 percent faster.

Prior to its Economic Gardening engagement, Waitr had about 125 full-time employees and filled over 500,000 orders. Within six months, staff had quadrupled to more than 500 and 2017 annual orders are expected to exceed 3 million, reflecting a 500 percent increase.

“Economic Gardening has played an integral part in the development of our growth strategy,” Meaux said. “It gave us experienced people to guide us through the engagement — and data we need to make critical decisions. Without it we would have been flying blind.”



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.