

Case study: Washington Vision Therapy Center

Dr. Benjamin Winters founded Washington Vision Therapy Center (WVTC) in 2010 to treat a variety of conditions such as amblyopia (lazy eye), strabismus (wandering eye) and vision difficulty caused by traumatic brain injuries. The Yakima-based company, which generates more than \$1 million in annual revenue, entered Washington's statewide Economic Gardening program in July 2016, looking for help with expansion efforts. Below Winters discusses how the engagement helped him open a new clinic and create seven new jobs:

“The Economic Gardening program was perfect timing for us,” said Winters. “The researchers were able to come in and provide information to help us make some critical decisions.”

When WVTC entered the Economic Gardening program, Winters had two clinics operating and was considering various models for expansion.

“Vision therapy is like physical therapy for the eyes to help children and adults with problems that affect their school, work and athletic performance,” Winters explained. “Many optometrists coming out of school would like to practice vision therapy, but aren’t comfortable opening their own clinic because they lack business acumen. And though a franchise might seem like a good option, doctors typically associate franchises with a loss of control.”

With that in mind, Winters wanted to develop a model that allows doctors to have ownership in a parent company and benefit from operational and administration efficiencies, but still operate independently. To help with this framework, Economic Gardening specialists on the National Strategic Research Team (NSRT) identified and evaluated healthcare-related franchise agreements in which doctors own a portion of the business, with a focus on contractual and incentive aspects.

Other key deliverables included:

- Providing information to help with WVTC’s strategic growth plan.
- Evaluating the company’s digital marketing efforts and providing new ideas for connecting with potential patients — and optometrists who might be interested in opening visual therapy clinics.



Dr. Benjamin Winters, founder of Washington Vision Therapy Center, with a young patient.

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- Identifying a list of prospective geographic markets in Washington, northern Idaho and western Oregon by leveraging geographic information system (GIS) tools.

The latter was especially important, as Winters had been eyeing the Spokane market for a third clinic. “The researchers not only confirmed that Spokane would be a solid market, but they were also able to determine what specific neighborhood would be best,” Winters said.

“Because Washington Vision provides specialized vision care, we were able to take advantage of demographic data that a general optometrist or medical office may not consider,” said Clay Smithers, a GIS expert and NSRT member who worked on the project. Smithers looked at not only consumer spending characteristics throughout the state, but also Tapestry Segmentation data, which defines 67 unique personas based on demographic, socioeconomic and behavioral data. “By looking at Washington Vision’s current customer list, we were able to highlight relevant Tapestry Segments and then find other markets where those households are common,” Smithers explained.

As a result, Winters opened the Spokane clinic in March 2017. Between the new clinic and expansion at the two existing locations, WVTC created seven new jobs, increasing full-time equivalent employee numbers from 17.5 to 24.5.

“Economic Gardening really opened my eyes to the types of services and analysis I need at this stage of my business,” Winters said. “GIS analysis wasn’t even something I would have thought of before, but will continue to need as we move forward.”

“Economic Gardening helps you take a 10,000-foot view of your company,” he added. “When you’re caught in the daily grind of things, it’s hard to step back, but it’s something you need to do consistently.

“I was also extremely impressed with the Economic Gardening process, the researchers’ professionalism, and how invested they were in my success. I hope this program is available to more businesses my size. It’s definitely something that will help the economic growth of our state.”



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.