



Independent Influence: Digital shop Grow helps revitalize downtown Norfolk via small business

By Minda Smiley-19 June 2017 15:02pm



Prince Ink is one of the small businesses that has benefited from Grow's Vibrant Spaces program

It's not often that you hear about an ad agency having a real, tangible impact on the local community and neighborhoods around it, but digital agency Grow has managed to do just that over the past three years by helping small businesses gain footing in its home of Norfolk, Virginia.

It all started when Grow, which has worked with brands like [Google](#), [Nike](#) and [Burberry](#), expanded into a second space on Norfolk's bustling Granby Street. Rather than take up valuable storefront space on the busy thoroughfare, the agency decided to block off the front of the building and reserve it for a local business instead.

"We're on a historic street with a bunch of these old, beautiful buildings. It used to be the heart of the city and it's sort of undergoing this revitalization," said Drew Ungvarsky, Grow's chief executive and executive creative director. "We've got two storefront spaces on Granby Street, and when we expanded into the second space, we didn't want to take another storefront from this street. We felt we really wanted the community to have a really active business and a neighborhood

asset. So we carved off the front of our building and only took the back of it.” Ungvasky then asked local entrepreneurs to come to him with their best ideas for the space, promising them reduced rent and help with refurbishments if they win.

“We said, ‘if you can come with your best idea of how to activate this space, we’ll be the best landlord you’ve ever had,’” he said.

Within seven weeks, Grow had received 17 applications for the coveted space. The agency decided to go with an idea for a community dining restaurant and bar, a concept that Grow helped turn into a trendy spot called Field Guide that serves rice bowls, sandwiches, wings and other eats on long communal tables.

Making Norfolk vibrant

After seeing just how much of a demand there was for small business support and space in downtown Norfolk, Grow decided to take things a step further by creating a program called Vibrant Spaces to help entrepreneurs grow their businesses in the downtown area. In partnership with the Downtown Norfolk Council, a local organization that promotes and enhances business and cultural initiatives in the city, Grow began raising money for Vibrant Spaces from local community leaders and private donors.

Working with the Downtown Norfolk Council and city landlords, the agency then opened up another round of applications, this time with three different spaces up for grabs. For this round, winners were promised half off of rent for two years as well as \$20,000 to help jumpstart their business. Within seven weeks, more than 80 candidates had applied.

The eventual winners were pet store Muddy Paws Downtown, screen printing company Prince Ink and creperie Lamia’s Crepes, all of which are still open today. When choosing the winning candidates, Ungvasky said that Grow was looking for businesses that represented “new ways of doing business for a modern era.”



Prince Ink is located at 433 Granby Street

In the world of Amazon and the changing shape of retail, we know that we're looking for one-of-a-kind businesses, experiential sort of businesses, [ones] that are creating new business models," said Ungvarsky. "Our goal is thinking about the purpose of a street level business these days."

Since Vibrant Spaces first launched in 2015, Ungvarsky and the Downtown Norfolk Council have rolled out other initiatives under the program's umbrella as well, one of which is a matching grant system that awards existing businesses that want to spruce up their storefronts with up to \$10,000 in matching funds. So far, Vibrant Spaces has rewarded eight businesses with matching grants.

Earlier this month, Vibrant Spaces announced its plans for Selden Market, an "incubator market" set to open its doors later this year at Norfolk's Selden Arcade. Selden Market will essentially let entrepreneurs test out their street-level business ideas in a pop-up style format without having to commit to a multiyear lease – for instance, booths can be rented for either \$100 per week or \$300 per month. Businesses feeling a bit more ambitious can opt to rent an "incubator storefront" within the market, with prices ranging from \$225 to \$325 per month for a six-month lease. Selden Market will be funded by both the city of Norfolk and the Downtown Norfolk Council.



Selden Market will open its doors this fall

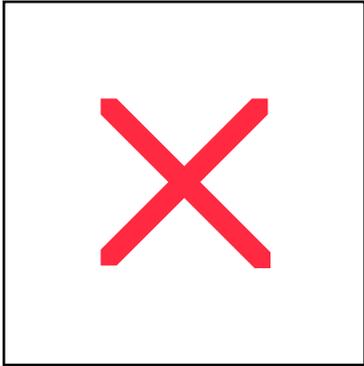
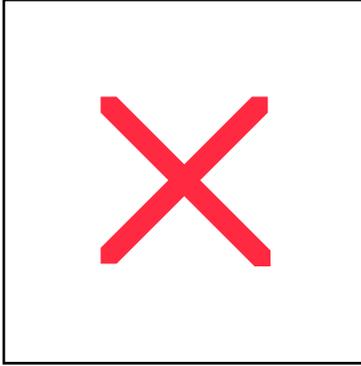
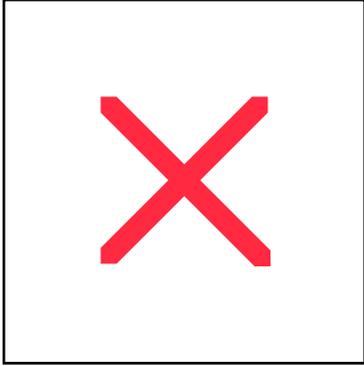
Ungvasky said that the idea for Selden Market stemmed from the fact that many of the smaller businesses who'd expressed interest in Vibrant Spaces' previous offerings were just as interesting as their larger, more established counterparts, but weren't quite ready to commit to a lengthy lease or large space.

"A lot of those businesses were of course the most innovative – they were the more risky ones," he said. "They were the true startup businesses. And we saw that it was challenging to put them into a multiyear lease with a really major financial commitment. So we started thinking, 'how can we put a bunch of those businesses together in a space and help them grow together and thrive together?'"

A part of the city's fabric

As an agency, Grow has played an integral part in getting Vibrant Spaces off the ground. Aside from creating and developing the concept for Vibrant Spaces, Ungvasky said the shop's roughly 40 staffers have also used their "creative innovation problem solving" skills to help the program meet its goals and come up with new ideas to better serve small businesses.

The agency's employees have also directly helped out some of the businesses that have benefitted from Vibrant Spaces; for example, one team volunteered to assist Lamia's Crepes with her branding, and ultimately ended up creating all of the signage and design elements for her storefront.



Grow employees helped Lamia's Crepes with its branding and marketing efforts

“Our role in the community is a defining characteristic of the agency,” said Ungvarsky. “People love that we care about the community around us and want to help build the place that we live. And we’ve found that that’s something that resonates with all of our talent. We’re a bunch of people who all have the same drive to create something from nothing.”

As far as talent goes, Ungvarsky said that the agency’s penchant for helping out the community and neighborhoods around it is something that has been attracting new hires to Grow for years.

“We found early on that we all had a great passion for creating things in the community, and we found that was directly tied to our business success. Our employees loved helping build the place around them, and that was a great part of our story for how new talent came into the shop, both local talent and relocated talent,” he said.

Ungvarsky said being independent also makes it easier for Grow to make a substantial impact on Norfolk since it gives the agency freedom to chart its own course.

“Being independent means we get to define success for the agency, and how we spend our time getting there. We want to create industry-defining digital marketing, and we also want to have a major impact on the community we want to call home. So yes, independence gives us the freedom to do that—to support projects like Vibrant Spaces as a company, and also to support our individual employees and their community efforts in every way we can,” he said.