

DIGITAL MAIN STREET LAB

DMS FUTURE PROOF

Specialty retailers and artisans join LookLocal.ca - a new multi-vendor marketplace launched with support from Digital Main Street LAB

THE CHALLENGE

When the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions shut down many businesses that were deemed 'non-essential', there was a rapid and major shift in consumer behaviour to online shopping. Big box retailers and global websites like Etsy and Amazon saw a boom in activity while most main street retailers were scrambling to develop curbside pick-up procedures and to launch or improve their e-commerce and social media capabilities.

The key challenge for small retailers and artisans was how to compete with big-box stores and online giants for consumer dollars and attention. The key challenge for consumers was finding a way to shop online and support local businesses in a way that is both enjoyable and convenient.

THE SOLUTION

Father and son entrepreneurs, Tim and Jonathon Root, have been publishing LookLocal print and digital magazines since 2013 to help build awareness of local retailers, artisans and community organizations. Over the years, they have developed loyal relationships with many of their advertisers and readers.

With COVID restrictions hurting their community, Tim and Jon started thinking about how they could actively help more local businesses and get the word out to their readers. Through their digital magazine and social media activity, they were already helping specialty retailers with marketing outreach. But now they saw the opportunity to design and build a multi-vendor marketplace where visitors to LookLocal.ca could browse and add items to their cart from multiple merchants with the convenience of one checkout.

They enlisted Cappers Applications, a local developer, to work on the new platform and joined Haltech as a client in summer 2020. While starting to build their prototype platform, LookLocal heard about the Digital Main Street (DMS) Lab program and submitted an application for support to help expedite their roll-out. In November 2020, Communtech, the regional innovation centre responsible for DMS Lab applications in Southwest Ontario, selected LookLocal's pilot project as one of four projects to receive support.



When the project was announced, Ahmed ElBedawy, Communitech’s Digital Main Street program director stated:



The Digital Main Street Lab connects technology companies with locally-owned businesses to collaborate on innovations that lead to impactful digital transformation. Looklocal.ca shares in our belief that main street businesses are the heart of communities across Southwestern Ontario and we are honoured to support them as they work to develop support for these businesses to compete with big-box retailers online."

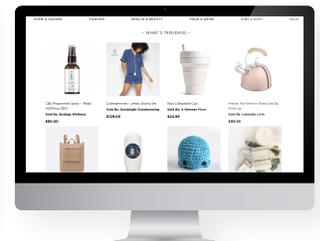
KEY DELIVERABLES

The first priority for the DMS Lab project was to polish the functionality of the platform including the following key items:

- Synchronizing inventory between LookLocal.ca and vendors' Shopify and WooCommerce e-commerce platforms to reduce risk of out-of-stock orders needing to be cancelled or refunded
- Offering a variety of shipping options (curbside pick-up, flat-fee delivery model and free local delivery for orders over a certain amount)
- Enabling geo-location functionality and integration with the Lightspeed POS platform to prepare LookLocal.ca to easily scale to other regions and more vendors

In addition to helping offset a portion of the development cost, LookLocal.ca was able to hire a new full-time staff member who has been trained and now handles much of the social media marketing and customer service functions. They also leveraged financial support from the DMS Lab to engage a part-time marketing expert to assist with outreach to new merchants, digital marketing and testing several 'influencers' to accelerate their audience engagement.

During the four-month pilot study, LookLocal was able to onboard 45 local merchants and built an excellent following on social media with over 150,000 impressions. They also had over 10,000 unique visitors to LookLocal.ca and garnered 450 opt-in email subscribers and over 1,300 Instagram followers.



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THE IMPACT

"As an independent small business just entering into my third year, it was impossible for my shop to start an e-commerce site, not only from an expense point of view - the manpower behind supporting it was daunting," stated Lisa Bogart, Bogart Home & Decor in Bronte Village, Oakville.



LookLocal.ca provides an amazing opportunity for small businesses. Bogart's has been a partner on the site since inception. It has been fantastic - providing an additional revenue stream and bringing in new customers that have discovered our shop through the site."

According to Jonathon Root, LookLocal.ca co-founder, "We know that womens' engagement in the work force has been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is satisfying to note that 42 of 45 merchants who signed up during the pilot study are businesses that are led by women or by husband and wife teams."

"We learned so much during this pilot study and are so thankful to Communitech and Digital Main Street for their support," stated Tim Root, LookLocal.ca co-founder. "We have built a good foundation from our base in Oakville and Burlington and look forward to expanding to nearby regions in the coming months."

SUPPORTERS

This Digital Main Street project was made possible through financial support from the Government of Canada through FedDev Ontario's Regional Relief and Recovery Fund.

For more than 10 years, FedDev Ontario has worked to advance and diversify the southern Ontario economy through funding opportunities and business services that support innovation and growth in Canada's most populous region.

The Agency has delivered impressive results, which can be seen in southern Ontario businesses that are creating innovative technologies, improving their productivity, growing their revenues, and in the economic advancement of communities across the region.

Digital Main Street was created by the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas (TABIA) with direct support from the City of Toronto. DMS is also supported by a group of strategic business partners, including Google, Mastercard, Shopify, Microsoft, Facebook, Intuit QuickBooks, Square, Yellow Pages and Lightspeed. A \$42.5-million investment from the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario (FedDev Ontario) and a \$7.45-million investment from the Government of Ontario brought together the Ontario Business Improvement Area Association, the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas, Communitech and Invest Ottawa to expand the Digital Main Street Platform in order to support more businesses going digital in response to the impacts of COVID-19 in Ontario.

Haltech is a not-for-profit Regional Innovation Centre funded by the Ontario Ministry of Economic Development, Job Creation and Trade. Haltech provides entrepreneurial education, advisory services and strategic connections to technology start up and scale up companies in Halton Region to help them accelerate growth and bring innovations to market.

With the support of the Government of Canada through the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario.

