

### Using Bricks & Clicks<sup>1</sup> to Access Retail Markets for Local Entrepreneurs

Veneta is a rural commuter community where the lack of local retail shopping outlets drives our citizens to shop in Eugene. It's estimated that every year, we lose over \$200 million in retail leakage as a result. We have a strong community of entrepreneurs, but without local physical shops to sell their products, the barrier to entering the market is significant.

In 2018, the City of Veneta's Economic Development Committee chartered an entrepreneur ecosystem development program under the brand name "VenetaWorks." A year later, VenetaWorks in partnership with Business Oregon, the Veneta-Fern Ridge Chamber of Commerce, AmeriCorps RARE, and Oregon RAIN embarked on an innovative pop-up retail market concept to create a seasonal downtown marketplace that gave local entrepreneurs a brick-and-mortar experience without the overhead challenges.

VenetaWorks' Popup program consisted of three elements: 1) A business Showcase in partnership with the Veneta Fern Ridge Chamber of Commerce with retail marketing exposure for local entrepreneurs; 2) A PitchFest at the Showcase for nascent local entrepreneurs to pitch their business to a local community panel to earn a retail booth at the Downtown Veneta Pop-Up Retail District; and 3) A summer downtown retail popup district featuring PitchFest entrepreneurs.

The Veneta Downtown Pop-Up Retail District gathered consumers and community and was popular with the local community and participating businesses, so VenetaWorks decided to continue the initiative for a second year. Rural Development Initiatives (RDI) with the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation awarded the City an inclusion Open grant to continue with VenetaWorks' entrepreneurial ecosystem experiment.

However, this year the COVID-19 pandemic derailed the key "gathering" and entrepreneur training elements. We needed a new plan that would be responsive both to this new limitation and the growing needs of our local new and existing small businesses experiencing the pandemic's economic impact.

In response, VenetaWorks, Oregon RAIN, the Foundry Collective, and local entrepreneurs got to work getting our nascent local retail market experiment back on track.

We quickly pivoted from the brick-and-mortar oriented Showcase and PitchFest to: 1) A free remote 10-week online business accelerator program (RAINmaker: [oregonrain.org/rainmaker](https://oregonrain.org/rainmaker)) in partnership with Oregon RAIN, and; 2) A Shopify-based regional retail platform ([shopfernridge.com](https://shopfernridge.com)) in partnership with the Foundry Collective. In other words, we pivoted from brick-and-mortar to Bricks-and-Clicks.

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<sup>1</sup> Credit to Brad Attig, Foundry Collective, for using "Bricks & Clicks" to describe a COVID-19 retail business diversified market presence strategy.

VenetaWorks' goal is to create an ecosystem of local rural entrepreneurship. Our Bricks-and-Clicks initiative accomplishes this by lowering both the physical and online barriers for local rural entrepreneurs to enter retail markets. By creating access to both physical and digital sales channels, we're providing entrepreneurs the opportunities they need to build their businesses while also creating a strong sense of community.

VenetaWorks leveraged our many relationships with local and regional partners to make the Bricks-and-Clicks initiative a reality. Locally, that included the Economic Development Committee, the Veneta Downtown Farmers' Market, the Veneta-Fern Ridge Chamber of Commerce, and St. Vincent de Paul. Regionally, we worked with Oregon RAIN, RDI, the Foundry Collective, the University of Oregon, AmeriCorps RARE, and others to bring a full suite of skills and perspectives into our small community.

We're proud of how we leveraged the expertise of our partners. From the academic world to nonprofits to local trade associations, everyone is working collaboratively to experiment with entrepreneurial ecosystem building. VenetaWorks innovated a popup retail marketplace and built on that experience by connecting it to an online, retail marketplace. Additionally, we find our approach innovative because we're testing the efficacy of supporting entrepreneurs through online and physical means, so we know how to more efficiently spend our resources. By tracking baseline metrics, we can compare to understand which type of support has a more meaningful impact on local businesses.

The project provides a new community service. With the "Bricks" part of our initiative, we created a fun and inviting community atmosphere. With the "Clicks" part of our initiative, we are giving many entrepreneurs their first experience in selling online. Taken together, the Bricks-and-Clicks initiative creates consumer traffic data that will help local downtown property owners and prospective investors develop business plans for building commercial space in the Downtown Veneta District.

There were a few obstacles to overcome. Our first challenge in pivoting to Bricks-and-Clicks was staff and budget. With the recent retirement of the city administrator and the unexpected departure of the economic development specialist in February 2020, VenetaWorks lost its experienced staff. Then in March, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the gathering events VenetaWorks used to cultivate entrepreneurs.

To overcome these obstacles, VenetaWorks leveraged our partnerships with Oregon RAIN, Foundry Collective, and RDI. VenetaWorks turned to Veneta's Oregon RAIN Venture Catalyst to help understand the pandemic's impact on local entrepreneurs. With that understanding, VenetaWorks and Oregon RAIN rebuilt the entrepreneur training program around virtual training for online market development with Oregon RAIN. About that same time, the non-profit Foundry Collective, a grantee partner through the City's RDI / Ewing Marion Kauffman grant, built a local online market space for creators in Harney County that appeared to be a perfect next step for VenetaWorks' entrepreneur development. We saw a complementary

benefit in connecting the online retail training with an actual online retail opportunity like that happening in Harney County. RDI quickly became an enthusiastic and supportive partner in re-aligning the City's grant budget to create our Bricks-and-Clicks vision.

Once we had secured funding, our next challenge was technical know-how to pull off our bold vision. We accessed the full strength of our partners by inviting them all to the table and encouraging them to work together. Frequent brainstorming sessions with Oregon RAIN and the Foundry Collective resulted in creative ideas to tap into other non-profits or entrepreneurs to access the skill sets we needed, like web design by a Harney County entrepreneur, online course design by Oregon RAIN, and Shopify platform coordination by a Corvallis maker. The online marketplace—ShopFernRidge.com—launched Labor Day Week 2020.

Our current challenge is creating a sustainable path for the participating businesses to operate the online retail store themselves. VenetaWorks will facilitate a conversation about various organizational structures--cooperative, trade association, or other--among participating businesses to see what best fits the value proposition of sustaining the online retail store. We're starting this conversation by first investing in a sense of community among local entrepreneurs through monthly meetups, shared learning, and modeling a collegial mentality. The result has been a blossoming of our local entrepreneurial ecosystem that we are thrilled to celebrate.

VenetaWorks' Bricks-and-Clicks initiative has exceeded our goals. Since beginning VenetaWorks two years ago, we have developed a network of 57 entrepreneurs that are actively engaging in our entrepreneurial ecosystem, which translates to 1.2% of our population. In the US, the average percent of entrepreneurs is 0.3% of the population, so the Veneta / Fern Ridge area has more than 4x the national average.

In the first year of the Bricks part of the initiative, we had three vendors; this year, we have eight. For the Clicks part of the initiative, we anticipated having four to five vendors launch with five products each, similar to the experience in Harney County. However, in the first month we've had fourteen vendors sign up, some with dozens of products!

The entrepreneurial community in Veneta is getting stronger as a result of our efforts. There is peer-to-peer mentoring, partnerships between businesses, and a strong sense of camaraderie among emerging business owners. For example: Three businesses partnered on creating The Eastside-West Delivery service to get food and home necessities to houses during the pandemic. In our monthly meet-ups, we have been seeing increasing numbers. What started as two or three entrepreneurs getting together each month is now fourteen or fifteen, and growing!

VenetaWorks and its public-private partnerships that helped create the Bricks-and-Clicks initiative is a program that could be duplicated by other cities looking to efficiently create a culture of entrepreneurship, improve their community's quality of life by showcasing small business owners, and ultimately build an entrepreneurial ecosystem.

*The City of Veneta is an equal opportunity employer and provider*

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