

Academic Paper – Norfolk Online Marketplace

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Introduction

Group 2 consists of Mmoleca Ehungwe, Ariyan Basher, Vanessa Guanilo, and Myself (Jake Fagan). We investigated a cyber hygiene app as our innovation originally, but quickly found out it was something that wasn't well thought out, would be difficult to develop, and wouldn't be something we wanted to pursue. We then decided to turn our focus toward small businesses, particularly small local businesses in Norfolk. Our innovation is an online marketplace that sells products from those small local businesses. One of the questions that we asked ourselves during this process is what if someone not native to Norfolk visited a local business and enjoyed their product and later after they visit Norfolk, they want more of the product from that local business? This set us up for one of the goals of business and that is to bring a bigger customer base to local businesses. Now this can work for people in the local area too, if locals were to visit the website, they might find a local business that they want to try, they then can go visit the business, or order the product online and get it delivered. The delivery for locals may not make much sense and raises the question "Well why would I order it online if I can just go get it myself?" and what we're saying to that question is that you definitely can. We have the delivery option for locals too because not everyone drives, can drive, or wants to drive to get the product. Our overall goal for this business was to help local businesses be successful and grow as well as promote the people of Norfolk to shop at local small businesses. We would achieve this by helping them sell products online to reach a bigger customer base and our website would help market the local businesses products. We came to these conclusions by researching common pain points of small businesses, and that research showed that small businesses struggled with marketing and advertising and competing with larger businesses. After

identifying this problem, we decided what we wanted the website to include. Most of the things we decided we wanted were typical things you would find on a marketplace website, such as a search bar, a browse page, etc. Then we started to create our websites, first starting with wireframe prototyping models, and moving to making mostly functional websites. Our innovation features 2 different websites that are linked together, one where the public will see and where consumers will buy the products, and the other is a seller-facing website where the local business can post their products and manage their listing on our website. The one thing I didn't like about the two different websites was that the consumer website was more visually pleasing than the seller website. But when asking for feedback on the websites from family and friends who help run small businesses, they said that it was okay and that the side that the people buying the products should be visually appealing and the side that the businesses use to post their products should be more functional than visually appealing.

Description of the problem and innovation

First, let's look at our problem. We've online 2 main problems that small businesses may face; struggles with marketing, advertising, or promoting their company and competing with larger businesses or growing. The marketing/advertising/promoting challenge small businesses may face can be solved with social media. However, there is a drawback to this, that is not everyone has great knowledge of marketing on social media, let alone using social media. Social media has become a popular and powerful way to promote business, but it is something that isn't always utilized by businesses as it can be intimidating to learn, research has found that marketing done by owners or managers of small businesses often requires specialized training (Ritz, 2019). That's where we've decided to step in. We plan to advertise our website online, whether it be ads on Google or through social media, and to help businesses by doing this we would feature the business and/or its products in the ad. That way we are not only promoting ourselves but we're promoting the businesses that decide to sell products on our site as well, giving them more exposure. This is something we would do for businesses that already utilize some kind of marketing and help them gain even more exposure as well.

The next challenge that many small and local businesses have is growing and keeping up with larger businesses and corporations. Research done by Dino Eliadis shows that many small businesses don't understand a concept that has been around for a long time called the growth cycle and he theorizes that business programs at colleges and universities are to blame due to those institutions creating businessmen and women geared and prepare towards larger business and corporation (Eliadis, 2013). He then goes on to state that small businesses are operated very differently from large corporations and those institutes with more respected business programs understand that and it is taught. One of the stages of the growth cycles laid out in that journal is

something we're targeting to help small businesses with growth, and that is rapid growth. We're hoping that by bringing businesses products to the internet and giving them more reach to more customers we can help them with that growth. The growth of a business depends on the resources of that business, and we hope to give businesses more tools and resources to sell their products at a low cost.

Now looking at our innovation, we decided to do an online marketplace. Many factors go into doing an online marketplace. One of our biggest factors is selling products through the internet is the way to go nowadays. More sellers and customers are turning to the Internet to buy and sell products because it is more convenient or quicker than going to the store and buying the products. Shopping has become a part of everyone's day-to-day life, and online shopping has become a favorite form of shopping over traditional shopping (Sharma, 2021). And with the increase in technology online shopping has an added advantage over traditional shopping with the ability to integrate a mathematical algorithm to recommend different products consumers might use (Sharma, 2021). In addition to the higher availability of products and added convenience, both sellers and buyers have somewhat of a trust when using online marketplaces. Now to be clear there is no one definition of trust. The Trust here with the seller would be the trust in us to perform honestly, competently, and within the seller's best interest (Sun, 2010, 183). The trust with the buyers is that we would deliver what has been promised and we won't compromise their trust in them by giving information to perform a transaction (Al-Debei, 2015). With this almost guaranteed trust there are benefits of doing business on the internet. As stated previously, our goal is to help small local businesses market and grow at a lost cost with this innovation. We envision getting income with this innovation by collecting a small commission on the transaction of the product (at this time we have not come up with a set rate of commission

for the income) but only on products that are sold through our site. The marketing of a business done through us will cost money, but it will be at a low cost and competitive with our marketing companies. When I talk about advertising and marketing these small businesses, what we have in mind is something like those Amazon ads you might see where they are showing off products you might be interested in. The products we would feature in the ad would be from small local businesses. We also plan to have a subscription service incorporated into our business that will unlock additional features and benefits. We've outlined some key functions and activities our innovation will be able to do. The First one is the platform development and maintenance. This is our team using user feedback to improve and make our platform better and more efficient. The next is marketing and outreach. This is done to attract the attention of potential customers and businesses to use our platform. Next, we have customer support, which is to help both the customers and the businesses remedy issues and provide resources while using our platform. Our innovation will also have a content moderation to monitor and ensure the content of the platform is within the guidelines and ensure the safety of users. Lastly, our innovation with feature data analysis to track the performance of the platform and identify areas that need improvement as well as give users recommendations based on viewed or bought products. The core structure of our innovation will be platform development and maintenance, marketing and advertising, customer support, payment processing fees, partnership fees, and data storage and analytics.

Relate

I don't think the problem we explored or the innovation we created relates to any classes I have taken outside courses related to my major. Most of the courses outside my major that I have taken are general education courses and cybercrime courses. However, I can relate the skills used while creating this innovation to courses that are offered at Old Dominion. I would say understanding marketing was something I gained more knowledge of while working on this business as well as graphic or digital design, especially when creating the website. The only class I think I can relate to the problem and innovation was my interpersonal communication class. In that class, I learned about interpersonal communication between different people and how to improve communication in those relationships. With our innovation, there will be a lot of interaction with local business owners and coordination with what is going on with the website. In addition, there will be communication between us as the owners and the customers who visit and use our site.

While there might be many classes I can relate to, I have worked part-time for a small local business in my hometown during my time at Old Dominion University. I learned a lot about how they operate and how their business is run while working there. However, this does not translate as well to what we are doing with our innovation as it is a winery. But something that they do is ship wine to customers who may not be local, and I haven't had much experience with it, but I understand how they do it and kept that in mind when identifying the problem we would solve and creating our innovation. Building off of interpersonal communication, something I have learned while working at the winery is how to talk to customers and the proper interaction with them, something I can use when talking to the business owners and customers who use our site. The winery I work at hasn't always been able to ship wine to people and during

COVID it was heavily implemented. During pre-covid times and pre-shipping times for the winery, we would get many people from out of town or even out of state who wished we could send them wine due to them being unable to drive 10/20/30 minutes down the street and pick up wine. This problem I heard many people ask to be solved many times sounded similar to the problem we were facing when we decided to create our innovation. This ultimately led to me relating this problem to the one we were trying to solve and helped me in this process.

Effectiveness

With our business/innovation being an online marketplace, there are a couple of different metrics that can be used to determine the effectiveness of the innovation. I think the biggest metric to use to determine the effectiveness is active users on the site or how many users are using the site month to month. This would give us an idea of how much traffic we're getting, as well as see if we aren't being effective. If our innovation is being effective, we should see a growth in the number of active users using our site. Another metric we could use is the session duration of user's visits and where they are spending the most time. For example, if there is an average session duration that seems very long but is in the browsing section of the website, we could conclude 2 things; either it's difficult to navigate around that section, or people are enjoying and browsing the products we feature. Consumer feedback is another way for us to determine effectiveness. With Consumer feedback there are many ways we can gauge effectiveness, one of them being consumer surveys. Something we would make optional but give the users the option to give us their thoughts and opinions on the site and what they would want to see changed or improved. Another way to use consumer feedback is through account sign-ups. We can tell if people are enjoying the marketplace if they create an account because that means they plan to shop on the site again and want an account to make checkout easier and quicker as opposed to using a guest account at the checkout.

Into Reality

To make this innovation a reality, there is a lot we would need. Firstly, we would probably need more team members than what we have now working on making a site, getting it public, and helping manage the site and support. Currently we only really have 2 team members working on making the site, and to add more aspects to that would be too much for 2 people. And with this being on the internet support would likely have to be a 24-hour deal. Thinking outside of physical things that we need to make this possible, we would also need to do a lot of outreach to get local businesses on board with our innovation. Local businesses may not jump on board right away as something starts up as there is always that chance it will fail. Some people may not want to put many products on the site or any at first without seeing that the site is working, so we would also need something to show that what we are doing is working. Something else we would need is funding and resources. A lot of what we need to do to help this business take off or become a reality is going to cost money to accomplish. What we need is investors to help us fund this endeavor and help us take off. Most of the tools that we use now such as the tools to create the website, we are using the free trials or student version which gives us full access for a very limited time. In addition to getting those tools, if we were to expand the team, we would need money to pay for them. With that, we would need a system to run scheduling, payroll, and handle accounting. As mentioned, earlier, I think we would benefit from having a team to help us with building and running our website, I also think on that team we need some kind of advisor. This is our first time creating a business, and although many people learn from mistakes, it would be ideal to have someone to help guide us and help us avoid failure. Whether that advisor is someone we know, someone we hire, or even an investor of ours.

Next Steps

What's next for us? Mmoleca wants to pursue making this innovation a reality and he plans to reach out to the Strome Entrepreneurial Center to figure out the next best step to take. I do not plan to continue pursuing this endeavor, as I have goals I have set for myself that I want to achieve, but I have offered to support and consultant Mmoleca in continuing the process. The Process of working on our innovation was a fun but stressful experience, that can feel very rewarding when progress is made. I learned a lot from my experiences during this process, one of the things I learned was that there is a lot of time and effort that goes into creating a business. and it's not something that happens in a short period of time. There is also a lot of planning that goes into it which ensures that it will be successful. We failed early on in the process and learned that our original idea was too much to take on. There was a lesson that wasn't necessarily learned by reinforced for me, and that you can't always count on others to help you out. Two of the group members weren't as involved in this process as I would have liked and I know the other group member who was just as involved as I was feels the same way. This created more work for us and made things a bit more difficult. If I had to do things differently, I have an idea for a business I wanted to explore, but in a group project setting, I wasn't sure if others would go along with it. I want to make a social penetration testing company, I've seen some people create them but there aren't many of them. The idea of the business is to test the security of other businesses by essentially breaking in. There would be techniques used such as lock picking, social engineering, and minor hacking. Now this isn't something that would just be like "Hey let's break into this business today", it's something that organizations and businesses would reach out to the business I'm interested in creating and ask to test their security and how easy it

is for something to get on the inside and steal information. Then afterward, we would meet with the people who hired us and lay out areas that could be improved on and their weak points.

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