

GRANT CULTIVATES GROWTH FOR THE SIERRA VINTNERS

Results are in for a completed thirty-month Specialty Crop Block Grant that was awarded to the Sierra Vintners Association (SVA) in November 2017 by the Department of Food and Agriculture. The grant monies were applied, and the intended outcomes were achieved, in a successful multi-faceted program that culminated in April 2020.

The realized goals were identified as needing to increase wine grape sales in Nevada County through a comprehensive marketing and public relations campaign for SVA products, and to increase the organizational capacities of SVA and its members through recruitment and training, with a ten percent increase in annual sales for SVA products, and an increase in both consumer awareness and intent to access SVA's products.

SVA President, Mario Clough of Lucchesi Vineyards and Winery was the Project Director for the grant activities and was pleased with the results. “We achieved higher visibility for the area throughout California and Nevada, and many members reported an increase in sales” said Clough.

The grant funding afforded various marketing activities, all of which were geared towards promoting SVA wineries and ultimately increasing the region’s overall sales and exposure. Infuze Marketing was the SVA’s main strategic partner for this project and together, they led the charge for implementing all projects outlined within the grants scope of work.

One of the first projects within the scope of work was to build out a website that was not only user-friendly and mobile responsive but was also built to showcase the region to encourage visitation through the usage of updated copy, photography, videography. The website was launched in 2018 resulted in 5,116 visitors within just 18 months. The four videos that were developed for the website and social media resulted in a total of 84,497 total minutes watched, which is just over 1,400 total hours viewed.

But those first two projects were just the tip of the iceberg. In the 30-month span Infuze rebranded the SVA, developed and implemented a social media

program, designed and distributed educational marketing materials including brochures and maps, planned and hosted an influencer gathering in Sacramento for members of the media to encourage local promotion of the region, coordinated and participated in two Market Visit events in Northern California with SVA winemakers to showcase regional wines and grapes directly to consumers and buyers, hosted virtual Meet Your Vintner events, and designed and distributed product boxes with accompanying marketing materials to 20 local members of the media.

In terms of sustainability for this project, SVA hired a part-time Executive Director whose main purpose is to continue all projects and follow the groundwork laid out by Infuze. To further both the members and the association's ability to market their crop, Infuze held a plethora of half-day training sessions. Topics for these trainings were as follows: Event Marketing, Tasting Room Marketing, Branding 101, Social Media 101, Digital Marketing, Digital Advertising, Photo Styling, Email Marketing, Websites, and Influencer Marketing.

Data collection was addressed by collecting annual sales data, designing and implementing a consumer and buyer survey for baseline and follow up information, and submitting bi-annual and final progress reports for the project.

Declining wine grapes sales in Nevada County—hitting a ten-year low—sparked the need for the grant to boost sales and awareness for SVA products in Reno, Tahoe, Nevada County, and Placer County, specifically. Sierra foothills based SVA members attributed recent declines to a lack of consumer awareness resulting from limited marketing efforts, prompting the need.

Although thwarted by a lack of membership participation and responsiveness, and more recently the COVID-19 virus outbreak, the intended outcomes were nonetheless achieved, and two new members joined the association. The goal of this project was to increase sales from \$5 million to \$5.5 million and by 10 percent as a result of the marketing and/or promotion activities. At the beginning of the project, it was discovered that the regional sales were roughly a third of the original \$5 million that was

reported. This impacted the final goal to increase sales from \$5 million to \$5.5 million, as there was not a solid foundation for regional sales. To combat this issue, Infuze surveyed all members to track their sales in 2017, and then compared that to the numbers collected for 2019. Out of the 15 members surveyed, 8 members submitted their annual sales in 2017 and 2019 – and the findings showed that sales increased regionally from \$1,623,769 to \$1,939,607, which was a 19.45% increase. The survey also found that wine case sales for the 8 members that responded increased regionally from 17,116 to 17,927, totaling an increase of 4.7%. Lastly, the study found that tasting room traffic increased 14.21%.

Additionally, the project outlined a secondary goal that out of the 1,000 consumers and wholesale buyers reached, 500 gained knowledge of how to access/produce/prepare/preserve specialty crops, and 500 reported an intention to access/produce/prepare/preserve specialty crops. Through social media alone, the project reached 1.2 million viewers, gained 6,474 new followers, and reported 91,135 total engagements on shared content. Unintended accomplishments during the two-and-a-half-year project included restructuring SVA bylaws to include local Grape Growers into the association, extending market visits beyond Sacramento and Reno, and Infuze Marketing creating a Loyalty Card Program to increase visitation and sales at member wineries. SVA was also given the opportunity to showcase the region in the downtown Grass Valley Visitors Center.

The Sierra Vintners Association formed over 20 years ago when five wineries banded together to strengthen their presence in the area. As stated on its website, “Sierra Vintners is part of the Sierra Foothills American Viticultural Area (AVA), which was established in 1987 on the western edge of the Sierra Nevada. The Sierra Foothills AVA is roughly 160 miles long, stretching south from Yuba County to Mariposa County.”

With any association, membership is likely to ebb and flow, and this rang true with the SVA. The association lost 9 members from the time of being awarded to the project conclusion. In this time, all membership loss was due to retirement, health issues, or change of ownership.

Clough's family purchased fifty acres at a 2600-foot elevation in 1988, cleared the land and built the infrastructure ten years later before picking the first harvest in 2002. Clough is passionate about the area and its grapes and hopes to keep the momentum going for the region as they enter the post-grant season. "Though we are promoting the region, we're still trying to promote each of the individual wineries to keep them viable and profitable," said Clough, SVA President the past five years.

Sierra Vintners members grow over 40 red and white grape varieties in the area encompassing primarily Placer and Nevada County, including areas north of Auburn—Nevada City, Grass Valley, Yuba and Penn Valley. The differing elevation changes—and consequently differing temperatures, humidity, sunlight, slope and more—create differing micro-climates that dictate the region's varieties.

SVA members comprise around half of Nevada County's wine grape growers, processors and distributors. The project's primary beneficiaries were the SVA 23 member wineries—at the time of the award— representing over 250 employees. As a result of project activities, not only did SVA's member sales increase, but also reported red and white wine grape crop tonnage and value. While not direct project beneficiaries, the food service and retail, transportation, arts and entertainment representing \$296 million in annual revenue and 3,220 employees within the county were positively affected as well.