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WINE GRAPE GRANT CULTIVATES MARKETING SUCCESS

May 1, 2020. Grass Valley, CA. The established goals of the 30-month Specialty Crop Block Grant that was awarded to the Sierra Vintners Association (SVA) in November 2017 by the Department of Food and Agriculture were successfully realized in April 2020. Declining wine grapes sales in Nevada County—hitting a ten-year low—sparked the need for the \$264,064 grant, intended to boost sales and awareness for SVA products, targeting Reno, Tahoe, Nevada County, and Placer County.

Sierra foothills based SVA members attributed recent declines to a lack of consumer awareness resulting from limited marketing efforts, prompting a focus on establishing a comprehensive marketing and public relations campaign for SVA products, and an increase in the organizational capacities of SVA and its members through recruitment and training.

Working with SVA, Infuze Marketing identified and implemented multiple activities, along with Web Designer Doug Case and Videographer Matthew Pye. Projects included designing and launching a new regional website, developing and implementing a social media strategy, designing and printing educational marketing materials, conducting social influencer gatherings, coordinating Market Visit events in Northern California, creating product boxes (distributed to 20 members of the media and buyers), establishing an SVA advisory committee, implementing member trainings and a member recruitment plan, hiring a part-time Executive Director, collecting annual sales data, designing and implementing a consumer and buyer survey, and submitting progress reports throughout the project.

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 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, now 15 wineries— representing over 250 employees. As a result of project activities, not only did SVA's awareness and exposure increase, but they also saw an increase in sales and overall tonnage. 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.

About Sierra Vintners Association

Sierra Vintners is a partnership of wineries located in Nevada County, California, collaborating to promote the emerging wine region located midway between Sacramento and Reno in the Sierra Foothills. This region offers a diverse wine experience with handcrafted and award-winning wines, rural vineyards and wineries, and downtown tasting rooms in the historic towns of Grass Valley and Nevada City, CA. For more information, visit www.sierravintners.com.