

Ride Out the Wave Program Summary

May 5, 2020

Ride Out the Wave was a volunteer campaign in Santa Cruz, CA during the 2020 Coronavirus lockdown that drove an estimated \$432,000 in gift card revenue to over 360 local businesses in 35 days. When State and County social distancing policy forced consumers to stay home, small business revenue disappeared overnight. Ride Out the Wave made it simple for isolated customers to purchase online gift cards that deliver immediate revenue in exchange for future goods and services. It was designed to be fast, simple, and scalable, with overall success measured as cash flow to local businesses.

The campaign was conceived, built, and operated by 9 volunteers from the local Amazon office and Santa Cruz Works from mid-March through early May. The site went live on March 29 and by campaign close on May 5 collected 361 business listings, 28,147 unique views, and 15,448 purchase clicks. We purposefully passed the transactions through to other vendors and don't know the exact amounts transacted, but a conservative \$25 average purchase yields \$384,000 with an additional \$48,000 in donated matching funds.

The www.rideoutthewave.org website aggregated buyers and sellers in an online gift card marketplace. Local organizations created a self-service listing in the online catalog, and either redirected it to their existing gift card processing page or accepted transactions through a free Square account created during the setup process. Site visitors (customers) selected their favorite merchant from the catalog and purchased directly in a highly scalable and low-cost system. The two development stages were 1) build a local business catalog and 2) drive end user traffic that converted to purchases. Business listings came through email marketing via local organizations such as the Downtown Association, Chamber of Commerce and City Economic Development Agency. Organic end user purchasing ramped during the campaign but spiked with digital end user promotions to Facebook Live concerts. On top of that, Santa Cruz Works added a matching program to raise the gift card price point and encouraged businesses to reach out to their own customer bases with this stronger message. Donations came from local tech, government, and community institutions (such as Amazon, Looker, the Community Foundation of Santa Cruz, Monterey Bay Economic Partnership, and private donors), and event attendees who uploaded their purchase receipts were matched while supplies lasted.

After an initial signup push to the business community the [first promotional event](#) happened on April 3 with local favorite Taylor Rae. The site saw over 8300 unique site visitors and 3400 clicks to gift card purchasing pages for 200 businesses. \$10,000 in matching funds from the City and County Economic Development agencies boosted the total campaign revenue to around \$44,000 (based on a conservative \$10 card value estimate) by April 4.

Through May 5 the site saw an additional 159 business signups and 12,005 more purchase clicks. 8,093 were driven by the second [April 24 promotional event](#), when artist Keith

Greeninger played a live sunset show on the beach, and Santa Cruz Works raised and distributed \$38,000 in new matching funds for minimum \$50 gift card purchases. Demand came from a second wave of press and digital outreach with an additional boost from businesses again reaching out to their bases with the matching funds message. We matched 760 purchases in the first 15 minutes before running out of funds. The 1445 total requests surprised us and an estimated 150 unhappy customers (<2% of purchasers) contacted us asking about their match or a refund. We moved quickly to [communicate](#) with both end users and businesses about this shortfall, explaining what happened, where to direct questions, and our processing timeline.

We were astonished, humbled, and inspired by the community response to this bootstrapped campaign. It was a tremendous success, and as social distancing restrictions ease and we have chosen to end the campaign. We've learned three things: 1) matching funds are a powerful incentive 2) organic awareness of the initial success combined with a wider promotional net increased purchasing 240% at the second event 3) the matching grant process disappointed some customers because our manual systems could not keep up with demand.

Team (in alphabetical order):

Adrian Dolatschko

Doug Erickson

Rex Harris

Drew Meyer

Matthew Swinnerton

Questions? ROTW@edithmeyer.com