



PHOTOGRAPHER SHIFTS FOCUS TO HIS BUSINESS AND DOUBLES SALES

Curtis Newborn will be the first to tell you he's a photographer, not a business person. "I'm not a great salesperson; I'm a creative." With a focus on the food industry, Obscura has enjoyed a client loyalty that is rare in its field.

"It usually takes 3-5 years to develop a client, and then they stay on for about 3-5 years. We far exceed that client stay."

When the pandemic hit and travel and location shoots became restricted, Curtis pivoted quickly and used technology like Zoom to keep the clients part of the photo sessions by tethering to the equipment so clients could see what they were shooting in real time. He also added to his repertoire adding motion and commercial video to Obscura's offerings.

"We started getting bigger and bigger productions, but it was like going 0-60 in 9 months. We had a lot of fun doing it, but it was almost too busy."

Several of Obscura's direct competitors were retiring or folding under the pressure of the pandemic. Having newly moved to Elk Grove Village in 2020, Curtis knew he needed help getting networked into the community.

"I want to be in business for a long time and be successful for a long time." So he reached out to Next Level Northwest to help him develop a growth plan and get new clients.

LOOKING AT THE BUSINESS THROUGH A NEW LENS

Curtis was impressed with the Next Level Northwest process from the start.

"It was pretty great what Next Level Northwest asked me to do to even be considered for the program. I had to give my presentation through Teams, so I had to sharpen my powerpoint skills. The vibe became very serious in a good way. I was pitching to prominent bankers and lawyers and mayors. And they didn't pull any punches – the whole process was great for me as an entrepreneur to be exposed to a whole community like that."

Once he was assigned a one-on-one coach, Jeff Williams, Curtis was expecting a revamp of his entire operation. But instead he was pleasantly surprised how focused the guidance was on how to be successful today. "Jeff challenged me to look at what was really important. He got me on track to focus on what was going to matter to my business growth."

**ONE NEW CLIENT
NATIONAL LIQUOR BRAND**

**2x DOUBLED SALES
YEAR-OVER-YEAR**

EMPLOYEE INCREASE:

**1 IDENTIFIED AND ADDED
A NEW FULL-TIME
EMPLOYEE**

He got me on track to **FOCUS ON WHAT WAS GOING TO MATTER TO MY BUSINESS GROWTH.**

Curtis Newborn, Founder & Chief Creative Officer of Obscura

As part of his business, Curtis managed a lot of freelancers. So his coach helped him realize he needed help in the studio and worked through the process of identifying the roles and responsibilities and got several quality applicants that turned into a new hire.

His one-on-one coach also brought aboard a freelance marketer to the team to get Obscura's social and marketing machine going in the right direction to support long-term growth.

DEVELOPING AS A BUSINESS OWNER

The additional hire and marketing helped put all of Obscura's expanded technology and services out there for the world to see. The result: landing a national liquor brand as a new client and doubling sales year-over-year.

"I feel like I really grew a lot as an entrepreneur and a business owner. Next Level Northwest really taught me how to fish. You can't be a solo entrepreneur and hear your own voice, telling yourself your own story. You need a sounding board to know if you're right or wrong. Next Level Northwest was a support group that had skin in the game. It was great to have people listen to my thoughts."

Looking ahead, Curtis feels prepared for whatever may come. "I've been careful with our growth and scale. We gained some market share with new clients and current clients and did more work than ever before. And I can adapt to whatever the market throws at us next."

A PICTURE PERFECT PROCESS

Curtis still expresses gratitude for the opportunity to find help within his community and set measurable goals for Obscura's future.

"Next Level Northwest really made me take the time to look at what I want to do with my business life. It was a really great opportunity and my time's more efficient because of this community I have around me now."

ABOUT NEXT LEVEL NORTHWEST

Next Level Northwest is a not-for-profit business accelerator program that supports existing local businesses. The program was founded by five Northwest Chicagoland municipalities—Elk Grove Village, Hanover Park, Hoffman Estates, Rolling Meadows, and Schaumburg—as a public-private partnership to support regional and local businesses through collaborative and innovative initiatives to help grow local economies. To learn more about Next Level Northwest or to submit an application for your company to join the next class of companies in the business accelerator program, visit www.nextlevelnorthwest.org.

THE PATH TO SUCCESS STARTS HERE



To get started, visit NextLevelNorthwest.org and/or contact your local Economic Development Director for more information.

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