



TOWN OF
HALTON HILLS
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MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor Bonnette and Members of Council

FROM: Allison Nap, Economic Development and Tourism Officer

DATE: March 3, 2022

MEMO NO.: ADMIN-2022-0005

SUBJECT: Halton Hills Digital Main Street (DMS) Program – Program Overview and Results

PURPOSE OF THE MEMORANDUM:

The purpose of this Memorandum is to provide Council with an overview and results of the highly successful Halton Hills Digital Main Street (DMS) Program.

BACKGROUND:

Digital Main Street (DMS) Program

Digital Main Street (DMS) is a program designed to support and improve the online presence and digital tools (including e-commerce) for small businesses. It has been a key part of the Town's coordinated response to COVID-19 and is part of the Town's Economic Recovery and Resiliency Plan.

DMS is built around an online learning platform, structured programs and the Digital Service Squad. The latter is a team of qualified professionals who help participating businesses grow and manage their operations through technology. DMS offers a Digital Transformation Grant of \$2,500 to each eligible business. Originally established in 2018, the program was extended in 2020 for DMS 2.0 and in 2021 the Province invested an additional \$10 million for DMS 3.0.

Digital Service Squad members, who lead DMS delivery, assist businesses with a number of activities, including completing digital assessments, enhancing online presence, developing 'Google My Business' profiles, enhancing social media presence, and providing support for basic website and e-commerce set-up.

In 2020, the Town received a \$12,500 grant to run the DMS 2.0 program for 10 weeks, from September to December. The program was managed by one Digital Service

Squad member. A total of 87 small businesses across Halton Hills took advantage of DMS 2.0 to help them mitigate losses caused by COVID restrictions, and to become more resilient and competitive as the economy recovers. The Digital Service Squad lead was able to assist businesses with creating or improving online stores, and providing tools to better reach new customers through social media and digital advertising. In addition, 24 businesses within the Acton and Georgetown downtowns each received a \$2,500 Digital Transformation Grant. This represents \$60,000 in direct support to local businesses and their e-commerce capacity.

Building on the success of DMS 2.0 from 2020, in February 2021, Town Council passed Resolution # 2021-0021 asking the Federal and Provincial governments to renew the program and expand grant eligibility to more businesses beyond Business Improvement Areas.

In July 2021, the Ontario BIA Association announced the launch of DMS 3.0 which included an expansion to the previous 'main street' criteria. Doing so, opened the program and grant eligibility to any small business in Halton Hills regardless of their location. Thereafter, the Town applied for and, in August 2021, was successful in receiving \$45,000 to implement DMS 3.0. DMS 3.0 concluded at the end of February 2022.

COMMENTS:

The 2021 grant allowed the Town to hire two Digital Service Squad staff and to run the program for six months - from September to February 2022. Similar to DMS 2.0, DMS 3.0 included partnerships with a number of private sector partners, including digital payment providers such as ShopHERE to provide incentives and discounts for businesses who joined through the DMS program.

Outreach

To market DMS 3.0, the Town's Digital Service Squad undertook comprehensive outreach to eligible businesses. Almost 350 businesses were contacted via calls and emails. In response, nearly 50% of contacted businesses expressed interest in participating. Considering the unprecedented challenges caused by COVID-19 on businesses and the resulting business focus on financial survival, this is a very good response rate.

Additional forms of outreach included digital and print advertising through the Independent Free Press, e-newsletters and promotion via business stakeholder organizations. Digital ads were placed on screens at Town facilities and program information was promoted on the Invest Halton Hills website. In addition, on September

28, 2021, a virtual information session was hosted by the Digital Service Squad to provide more detailed program information and to answer questions.

DMS 3.0 was also successfully advertised on social media. A total of 25 posts were created over LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. These were seen over 95,000 times. Paid Facebook ads were viewed 174,000 times.

Results

Throughout DMS 2.0 and 3.0, the Digital Service Squad held over 200 one-on-one consultations with Halton Hills' small businesses to assist with their digital needs and to connect businesses to other resources. Among other things, staff answered questions about grant applications, website design and functionality, paid social media advertising, Google profiles, software subscriptions and hardware upgrades.

In addition to the 24 businesses that received the Digital Transformation Grant in 2020, 36 received the grant in 2021. In total, the 60 businesses received \$150,000. This significant local investment will assist businesses in continuing to enhance their e-commerce capacity through website and software subscriptions, digital training, hardware and the hiring digital marketing and website designers.

Below is a breakdown of the DMS tools used by participating businesses, for DMS 2.0 and DMS 3.0 combined.

Location	Consultation with Digital Service Squad	\$2,500 Digital Transformation Grant	ShopHERE – new online store
Georgetown	113	37	22
Acton	46	19	7
Glen Williams	22	4	1
Norval	5	0	0
Home-based business	29	N/A	27

In addition to the main DMS programs and services, staff also provided businesses with an opportunity to have '360 photos' taken of their businesses. Photos were taken using a special wide-angle camera so that businesses could upload images of recent renovations to Google. Staff will continue to make the 360 photo service available to businesses.

DMS has an approved vendors list of digital marketing businesses across Ontario. Successful grant recipients can hire these vendors to fulfill their Digital Transformation Grant requirements. With the support of the Digital Service Squad, six Halton Hills-based digital marketing businesses were added to the DMS vendor directory.

Feedback Survey

A comprehensive feedback survey was completed to gather information about businesses' experience with the program.

The survey had 36 responses. The feedback was extremely positive and underscored the program's importance and value to the business community. Feedback highlights include:

- 100% said that the Digital Transformation Grant supported their business needs;
- 95% of businesses were very happy with DMS services;
- 90% preferred virtual meetings with the Digital Service Squad; and
- The most common reason businesses could not take full advantage of the DMS program was that they did not have time in light of the unprecedented COVID-19 impacts.

As example of the feedback received by the Town from participating businesses, below is a quote from the Acton Veterinary Clinic:

"The \$2,500 Grant allowed us to create a professional video to showcase our new clinic in motion. This video allowed us to introduce staff, our beautiful new facility, and meet our adorable animals. As a result, we successfully increased traffic to our website and our online store."

Next Steps

It is anticipated that DMS 4.0 will be launched sometime in 2022. While details of the next round of funding have not yet been announced, pending review of program details, Town staff anticipate once again applying for participation.

In addition, based on the valuable insights and business connections gathered via DMS 2.0 and 3.0, Town staff are exploring opportunities to offer some of the key business supports on a more permanent basis as well as options to assist larger businesses in target sectors.

CONCLUSION:

With a total of \$57,500 received by the Town for DMS 2.0 and 3.0, the Town was able to deliver a highly impactful program, with a high Return on Investment. As part of the Economic Recovery and Resiliency Plan and the suite of business supports implemented by the Town in response to COVID-19, DMS provided businesses with direct one-on-one support to expand their e-commerce capacity.

Reviewed and approved by,

Damian Szybalski, Director of Economic Development, Innovation & Culture

Chris Mills, Chief Administrative Officer