

EMPOWERING BRICK-AND-MORTARISM: ESTABLISHING A MARKETPLACE FOR ARTISANS, DESIGNERS, AND GRAPHIC DESIGN STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Online marketplaces have become a convenient shopping option for consumers.¹ The appeal lies in their vast product selection, flexibility, and the ability to shop anytime from home or elsewhere using electronic devices.² While physical stores are not obsolete, their roles are evolving. For brick-and-mortar businesses, establishing a local presence and fostering community engagement remain crucial for building long-term customer relationships and brand loyalty³. Despite detailed online product descriptions, consumers often prefer in-store interactions with knowledgeable associates. Personalized service and direct engagement with products foster emotional connections and brand loyalty, which online platforms struggle to replicate.⁴

This raises questions: Is the era of physical stores over? Are graphic design students at local universities equipped to navigate the changing retail landscape? To explore this, the researcher used his sabbatical from December 2023–May 2024 to establish slyck, a physical store in downtown New Albany, Indiana. Launched on October 6, 2023, slyck served as a creative hub for current and former graphic design students, local artists, and makers until its closure. Located at 313 East Spring Street, the store offers 1,200 square feet of retail space and 700 square feet of basement space. Since its soft opening, slyck has hosted three exhibitions, attracted local and regional clients, and collaborated with seventeen vendors. The project aims to assess the likelihood of student participation and the level of support from local creatives for such initiatives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the need to diversify design pedagogy by integrating entrepreneurship education. Institutions like the University of Michigan offer programs such as the Entrepreneurship Minor, which includes over eighty courses on startup creation, innovation, marketing, finance, and business development, catering to students from diverse academic backgrounds. Similarly, the California College of the Arts offers courses like Creative Founder, which explores the intersection of design and entrepreneurship, teaching students to think like entrepreneurs and leverage design thinking principles to innovate and create successful ventures. Research highlights that interdisciplinary collaboration significantly enhances innovation, underscoring the importance of integrating entrepreneurship into design curricula to equip students with the skills needed to navigate the evolving professional landscape.

The Need for Design Pedagogy to Diversify

The University of Michigan's Entrepreneurship Minor offers over 80 courses on startup creation, innovation, marketing, finance, and business development, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration.⁵ Similarly, Christina Wodtke's Creative Founder course at the California College of the Arts emphasizes entrepreneurial thinking and design innovation⁶. Research by Frans Johansson, author of *The Medici Effect*, shows that collaboration across diverse disciplines enhances innovation.⁷ Anderson argues that graphic designers can leverage their creativity to become entrepreneurs by helping clients bring ideas to market.⁸ Frans Johansson, author of *The Medici Effect*, found that collaboration among individuals from diverse disciplines, backgrounds, and expertise areas significantly enhances innovation.⁹ At Grand Canyon University, the IDEA Club's entrepreneurial spirit came to life during the 2016–2017 academic year as students organized a marketplace like a flea market, engaging in buying and selling goods while contrasting online shopping with brick-and-mortar stores. Initially, most participants were student companies showcasing their ideas and promoting their businesses, which ultimately encouraged some of them to start their businesses on Etsy.¹⁰ Similarly, the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City provides educators with resources, lesson plans, and activities to empower students to consider entrepreneurship as a future option¹¹. These tools have helped students envision themselves as entrepreneurs and understand the principles of starting and managing a business.

The Impact of Online Sales on Local Economy

The Small Business Squad notes that during the 2018 holiday season, \$126 billion was spent on online purchases in the United States which significantly impacted the sales tax revenue collected by states and local governments.¹² The state of Indiana lost \$195 million in sales tax revenue to online purchases in 2012, according to the University of Tennessee.¹³ To mitigate these losses, Indiana implemented a law in October 2018 requiring retailers with at least \$100,000 in sales in Indiana or those serving at least 200 Indiana residents annually to collect sales taxes on online purchases.¹⁴

Brick-and-Mortar Advantages and Disadvantages

While brick-and-mortar stores offer unique advantages, they face challenges such as high overhead costs, including rent, utilities, storage, and maintenance, which affect profitability.¹⁵ Competing with online businesses like Amazon.com and other physical stores requires unique products, effective marketing, and excellent customer service.¹⁶ Despite the rise of online shopping, brick-and-mortar stores remain significant, accounting for 72 percent of U.S. retail sales in 2024.¹⁷ A.T. Kearney's study of 2,500 shoppers across demographics found that 90 percent prefer brick-and-mortar stores, highlighting their enduring appeal.¹⁸

The Era of Physical Stores is Far from Over

While online shopping has transformed retail, physical stores remain relevant. Trax Retail (2023) notes that 87 percent of shoppers start their searches online, but 90 percent of transactions occur in physical stores.¹⁹ Consumers value the social experience, instant gratification, and avoidance of shipping costs and return hassles. Physical stores also build trust and credibility, offering stability and reliability.²⁰ They provide unique benefits like immediate product access, personalized service, and the ability to try products before purchasing. Additionally, they foster face-to-face interactions, creating opportunities for professional growth.²¹ Ortiz (2023) highlights that physical marketplaces build community among designers and clients, encouraging partnerships that enhance portfolios and business opportunities.²²

METHODOLOGY

The research method employed is action research, a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and

reflecting. Introduced by Kurt Lewin in 1944, this methodology emphasizes collaborative problem-solving and critical reflection, bridging the gap between theory and practice.²³ In this project, the researcher single-handedly creates and operates a physical marketplace, slyck, which serves as a real-world laboratory for testing entrepreneurial and design concepts. By engaging directly with vendors, students, and the local community, the researcher gathers valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of integrating design education with entrepreneurship. These insights inform the development of a senior-level graphic design course, which incorporates practical, real-world scenarios to prepare students for professional challenges. This iterative process—where observations from the marketplace directly influenced academic curriculum—exemplifies the core principles of action research.

The methodology's focus on continuous implementation, reflection, and adjustment ensures the project adapts to evolving needs and contexts. For example, feedback from the marketplace's soft launch prompted refinements in both store operations and course structure, showcasing how action research drives adaptability and innovation. By linking academic theory to practical experience, this approach enhances the relevance of design education and equips students to navigate the complexities of the modern creative economy. Action research thus serves as both a methodological framework and a catalyst for transformative learning, aligning academic goals with real-world outcomes.

Factors Influencing the Choice of Location

After surveying multiple potential locations, a two-story building constructed in 1919 at 313 East Spring Street in downtown New Albany was selected as the site for slyck (Figure 2). With approximately 2,260 square feet of usable space, it allows for a flexible layout accommodating the gallery, marketplace, and workshop. Its central location near local eateries, retail stores, and civic amenities fosters a vibrant and synergistic environment.

The area sees consistent foot and vehicle traffic, especially during lunch hours and weekends, making it ideal for spontaneous visits and community engagement. The building's street-facing facade and corner positioning enhance visibility, supporting effective signage and display opportunities. This combination of historic charm, square footage, and prime location maximizes exposure and supports long-term growth.

Naming and Design Decisions for the Store

The selected name is short, memorable, and must be available as a website URL (Figure 1) and on social media (Figure 4). A concise name ensures easy recall and online searchability. The decision to use all lowercase letters creates an approachable, modern feel. The last three letters, "YCK," are the researcher's initials in reverse, adding a personalized and unique touch. Orange is chosen as the brand color for its associations with enthusiasm and creativity, helping differentiate the brand in a crowded market with a clear and visually appealing identity.

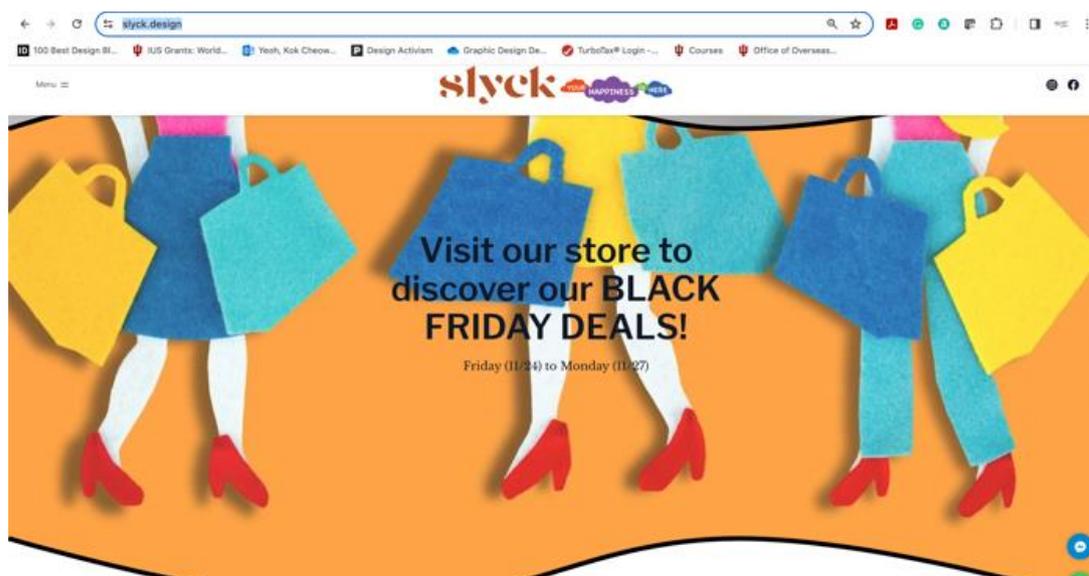


Figure 1. The slyck website occasionally updates its messaging to align with seasonal themes.

Renovation and Construction of the Physical Space

This stage focuses on the comprehensive renovation of the physical space to support the store's multifunctional use as a gallery, marketplace, and workshop (Figure 3). The renovation process entails significant structural and aesthetic updates, beginning with the installation and removal of interior walls to define and optimize distinct zones for displaying artwork, showcasing vendor products, and hosting creative workshops. Outdated fluorescent lighting fixtures are being replaced with energy-efficient 2' x 4' LED ceiling panels and adjustable spotlights to enhance visibility and create a warm, inviting ambiance tailored to the needs of each area. Infrastructure improvements also include the installation of a modern surveillance system for security, the setup of high-speed Wi-Fi to support digital transactions and connectivity, and the addition of essential fixtures such as secure door locks, cabinetry for a kitchenette area, and accessible storage solutions. These updates are critical to ensuring the space is both functional and welcoming for artists, entrepreneurs, and visitors alike.

Developing Vendor Partnerships

The researcher seeks partnerships with local designers, artists, and makers to feature their products and artwork in the store. Potential vendors are identified through recommendations from friends, colleagues, social media, forums, and visits to farmers' markets in Floyd County and the Louisville metropolitan area. A lawyer-vetted agreement is drafted during this period. The number of vendor partnerships and the variety of products available are tracked to measure progress. By selling their creations at slyck, vendors acknowledge that they are the sole creators of their products and do not plagiarize others' work. Due to the nature of the products, slyck enforces an "all sales final, no refunds, no exchanges" policy.

Readying the Store

This stage involves curating a roster of artists and vendors for consignment while preparing the space for daily operations and events. Selected participants reflect local talent, product diversity, and alignment with the store's mission. At the same time, essential infrastructure is installed, including anti-theft devices, a point-of-sale (POS) system, and modular furnishings such as shelving, tables, and seating to support events and workshops. The POS software supports inventory tracking, vendor management, and sales reporting. The retail floor is designed for flexibility, with shelf units rotated regularly to keep the space visually fresh. In the gallery area, a rail-based hanging system with stainless

steel cables and hooks is used—nails or adhesives are not permitted to protect the walls. All vendors and exhibitors must carry their own insurance, as slyck’s policy does not cover theft, accidents, or other losses.

Vendors have three options:

- a) A free white metal shelf rack (21 inches deep × 36 inches wide × 62 inches high) with four tiers.
- b) An open gallery space (40 feet) adjacent to the retail floor, divisible into 20-foot sections for bulky or larger items.
- c) An enclosed gallery room (54 inches deep × 160 inches wide × 90 inches high).

Launching the Store

slyck operates from 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., four days a week, providing consistent access for shoppers, artists, and community members while maintaining flexibility for events and vendor needs. The store remains closed on public and observed holidays to accommodate staff schedules and community rhythms. The business held a soft opening in October 2023, which featured an initial marketplace and the debut gallery exhibition. This phase marked the beginning of operations, allowing for real-time observation of foot traffic, vendor logistics, and customer engagement. Insights gathered during this preliminary period were instrumental in refining the business model, improving layout decisions, adjusting vendor policies, and clarifying operational workflows.

In preparation for slyck’s launch, participating vendors are encouraged to actively promote their merchandise on social media—especially Instagram and Facebook—at least twice per month. Posts should include the hashtag @slyck313 along with other relevant tags and media to increase reach, improve brand awareness, and drive in-store traffic. This coordinated marketing approach helps build a collective identity while expanding each vendor’s audience.



Figure 2. The façade of the store.



Figure 3. The main retail space.

Generating Revenue and Sustaining Operations

This stage is about generating revenue and sustaining operations to ensure the long-term success of the store. Revenue and expenses are meticulously tracked to assess financial sustainability and evaluate the effectiveness of marketing and outreach efforts aimed at attracting customers and building partnerships with local artists and makers. Depending on their status (vendor, exhibitor, or student), slyck retains a commission of 30 percent to 40 percent of the sale price for each product sold. Consequently, vendors receive 60 percent to 70 percent of the sale price, minus additional fees such as those imposed by the POS company (3 percent to 5 percent per transaction) or slyck.

EVALUATION AND IMPACT ASSESSMENT

The Brevity of the Project

At its core, this project employs a methodology blending literary studies, observations, and a business plan, merging theoretical insights with practical applications to bridge academic research and real-world entrepreneurship. It tests a business concept while aligning with academic goals, particularly integrating entrepreneurship into education to equip students with skills for the evolving professional landscape. However, tight timelines, limited budgets, and market complexities constrained its scope and impact. Despite these challenges, the project offers valuable insights into combining academic theory with entrepreneurial practice, laying groundwork for future initiatives.

Administrative Barriers to Grant Acquisition

Aside from the salary provided during the sabbatical period, the entire project budget was funded by the researcher's personal savings. This self-financing approach allowed the project to proceed independently but also placed significant financial strain on the researcher. Despite proactive efforts to secure grants, including extensive research and multiple grant applications, the researcher faced significant setbacks due to the university administration's refusal to provide support, which complicated efforts to obtain institutional funding. This lack of financial backing not only limited the project's resources but also highlighted the challenges of aligning innovative academic initiatives with institutional funding policies.

Timing and Logistical Challenges

Renovations were scheduled to begin in January 2022 but were immediately delayed due to contractor issues. The initial contractor abandoned the project and ceased communication, prompting the researcher to file a lawsuit on May 24, 2022. This legal battle lasted two years, resulting in significant financial setbacks. Although some funds were eventually recovered, the delay substantially increased costs and disrupted the project's timeline. The need to find and hire a new contractor further compounded these challenges. The new contractor began work during the COVID-19 pandemic, which introduced additional obstacles such as supply chain disruptions and labor shortages.

SUMMARY AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Importance of Supporting Local Artisans and Designers

Beyond conventional creative approaches, this project serves as a symbol of inclusivity and empowerment, engaging the broader community. By offering marketplaces, curatorial spaces, and entrepreneurial opportunities to diverse audiences, slyck has fostered human expression, creativity, and skill development. These initiatives have contributed to the overall well-being of southern Indiana and its surrounding counties. The educational significance of this project is profound, as it addresses accessibility gaps in creative learning and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Incorporation of Real-World Practices

Rooted in client expectations, pragmatic solutions, and material exploration (especially for merchandise), this project lets students and former students tackle problems in a realistic business setting. By addressing client needs and market demands, they gain hands-on experience in solving real-world challenges, from concept to execution. Unlike hypothetical classroom scenarios, this initiative mirrors real-world expectations, preparing students for professional challenges. This experiential approach enhances problem-solving skills, fosters creativity and adaptability, and deepens their understanding of business complexities. Bridging academic theory with practical application, the project equips the students with the tools and confidence to thrive in a competitive, evolving marketplace.

CONCLUSION

While digital opportunities abound, brick-and-mortar stores remain crucial for graphic design students, offering practical experience, networking, and innovation—key to building a self-employed career. This sabbatical project eventually led to the creation of an assignment integrated into a 400-level senior course launched in spring 2024. After returning to Indiana University Southeast, the researcher implemented the assignment, which uses a practice-based methodology to explore design thinking processes like concept generation, creative experimentation, and prototyping. As a result, ten graphic design students embarked on an entrepreneurial journey to create sellable merchandise, including branded apparel and typography-infused art prints. Beyond branding and aesthetics, students produced mockups of their final products. Open to alumni, the initiative also benefits the university. The project has provided a platform for local designers and students to showcase talent, gain real-world experience, and contribute to downtown New Albany's cultural and economic vitality, albeit for a short amount of time.

NOTES

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³ Barbara Čater, Denis Marinšek, Luka Cerenak and Stanko Devic, "Brick-and-Mortar vs Online Retail." *ResearchGate*, accessed June 3, 2024, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340526228_Brick-and-mortar_vs_online_retail.

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¹² Vanessa Aguirre, "How Online Sales Impact the Local Economy: The Good and the Bad," *Become Distinct*, November 17, 2020, <https://becomedistinct.com/blog/how-online-sales-impact-the-local-economy-the-good-and-the-bad/>.

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