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BUSINESS

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LOCAL MEDIA & MARKETING



Miles Bassett and Mike Hannah of Wildman Web Solutions

SOCIAL MEDIA & THE Digital-World

The pandemic advanced global digital commerce much more quickly than if it had never occurred.

by Emily Mulligan, photos by Steven Hertzog

Five years' worth of business happened during about six months of 2020. Umm, what? Indeed, the shift to digital commerce during the pandemic was so significant that it actually pushed all of online business ahead about five years during that span of 2020, according to data from IBM's U.S. Retail Index. Let's explain: As every shop, grocery store and even restaurant shifted to online ordering, curbside pickup and added delivery, consumers had to research and select those purchases through digital devices. So, while we sat on our couches in our sweatpants, digital media companies were scrambling to innovate, evolve and grow the digital marketplace to put it at our fingertips. And the changes and advances made during that time were enough to evolve all of digital commerce forward about five years.

LOCAL DIGITAL MEDIA

Digital business and digital interaction made large leaps locally during that time, as well, according to local businesses. Lawrence is home to several companies that specialize in digital media, digital marketing, website design, social media consultation and digital advertising.

Wildman Web Solutions was founded in 2017 by Lawrence native Miles Bassett, a former professional software engineer who worked on projects for Microsoft, Sprint and IBM, as well as government agencies. Marketing expert, former radio executive and longtime Lawrencian Mike Hannah has since joined the company, which specializes in providing smaller businesses the technology typically available to larger corporations, including online retail



Doug Stremel and Michael Snell of Jackalope

and marketing. Bassett's tech abilities plus Hannah's marketing savvy are a distinct combination for Lawrence's local business scene, providing digital experiences that are similar to much larger retailers and operations.

Doug Stremel is the creative director of Jackalope, which specializes in branding and marketing. He is a professional photographer, video producer and designer who aims for his clients' online presence to resemble that of their physical locations and their identities as a company. Jackalope, launched by Stremel and Michael Snell in 2017, represents many local companies and entities, with the goal of seamless navigation among the various aspects of the business' digital presence, from digital ads to their graphic presence in social media and their website, whether on a computer or mobile device.

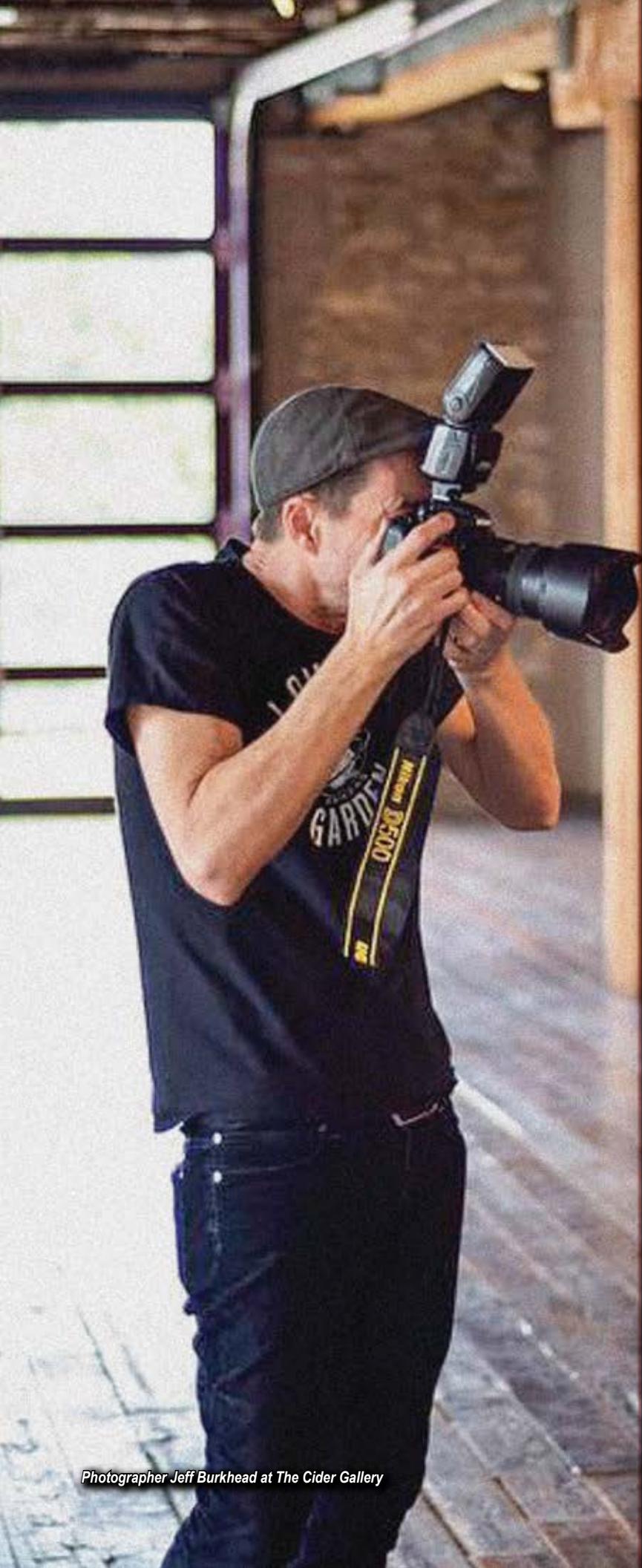
Jeff Burkhead has been the communications manager since 2013 at Bert Nash Community Mental Health Center and has seen the necessity of digital communication evolve and increase dramatically during his tenure. A professional photographer, Bur-

khead leans on his visual media skills while he crafts Bert Nash's stories and key messages for a variety of digital media, including the Center's website and social media accounts.

OVERUSING THE WORD "DIGITAL"

What does "digital media" even mean? Pretty much all photography is digital now, 99.99% of video is digital, we all talk about algorithms way more than we thought we would, and unfortunately, we've probably all had multiple run-ins with bots.

Decades ago, when people discussed the media, they were talking strictly about newspapers, magazines, television and radio. Those were the sole venues for delivering news, and they also provided entertainment. Everyone knew what those media sources were and how to access them. Advertisers and marketers also knew how to send effective messages to their customers through each medium—and arguably they still do.



Wildman Web Solutions' Hannah says the categories of digital media aren't really all that different.

"People contextualize messages to each platform just like in the old media days in TV, radio and newspaper. It's just far more important now to fit the platform you're using," he explains.

Wildman takes the approach of building out bigger systems and sets of software that can be scaled down and customized to what each local business needs. With Bassett investing the time and effort to build a big technical infrastructure, he says, then they can cut out and take what the business needs, and not heap on what they don't. For example, some local Lawrence businesses have their own mobile apps; for others, a mobile app doesn't fit what they do.

"We worked for giant companies, and a large part of our mission has been to take the larger tech we saw at those places and make it more affordable and accessible," Bassett says.

Jackalope takes a wide view of a business' scope and its place in the community, and pairs it with a digital look and feel that captures that. Stremel says logos, colors and even images of the people who work there help to show what the business is about.

"We are really strongly focused on branding and making the website look like the client," he says. "It's also about knowing what tool you need and understanding that we can use any tool."

Stremel then adapts the branding and visual impressions, incorporates messaging and translates all of that to representation in paid media, online ads, including Google ads, and social media as fits the business' strategy.

For Burkhead's part, he has worked over time to set the Bert Nash website as a landing place for all sorts of people in different situations: those in crisis who need help,

Photographer Jeff Burkhead at The Cider Gallery

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community members curious about the types of services available and even potential donors and volunteers who want to help out. He also has crafted Bert Nash's social media policy and presence from scratch, and regularly updates four platforms: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter.

"We want our voice to be positive and encouraging, but also transparent and helpful, and reflective of what is happening," he says.

KEEPING UP WITH THE MUSKS AND ZUCKERBERGS

Technology changes so quickly, and as we saw with the five-year change in just a few months of 2020, it has to be a type of call-and-response with users and customers. But people change their minds and their habits even quicker than a cursor blink, so how can smaller, local businesses dream of keeping pace?

For their part, Wildman's Bassett sees the company's suite of software and applications as a "living, breathing entity," and he updates the software regularly, then pushes the updates to his clients who use that particular option. That way, they have it before they even know they need it.

"We do something for one client and apply it across to all clients," he explains.

Stremel says he holds tight to the core attributes of design and branding for each of his clients, while keeping an eye toward what might shape-shift next.

"The landscape moves so quickly in terms of what's popular and how you can get in front of things. It's a young person's game," he says.

Burkhead says because he's not in the technology business, he just has to live the serenity prayer and work to control what he can control.

"I began to focus on the storytelling part. It's important to share the work you're doing, and it ties in with development, so hopefully they'll want to support us," he says.

He much prefers to have the stories and events told by the people at Bert Nash who live them, knowing that personal touch has an impact.



The Bert Nash Communications Team.
Robin Wagner, Jeff Burkhead and Emily Farley

Wildman's Hannah says that so many businesses see that type of personalization as a challenge of the new media. That's because, for decades, businesses crafted all of their messages to make them not about the people or the reasons behind the work.

"Digital media is an old story told in a new way. You present your apps, social media and technology in a way that is not top-down anymore. You have to be more authentic from a business perspective, to tell the 'why' of why we're doing business," he says.

Stremel says social media updates are time-consuming for businesses and often start off with regular updates, but then they fall off over time. Especially for smaller businesses, it is all they can do to keep up with the day-to-day tasks of keeping the business afloat, he says.

Wildman offers a social media tool that at least eases the time crunch of posting to multiple platforms. The business client enters the information and photos in one application, and then the posts are distributed to the platforms of their choice. The system also provides metrics so the clients can gauge the reach of their posts.

Even with little tangibility and a lot of capriciousness, digital media continues to be built on a strong foundation of quality visuals, branding and messaging. Those attributes and goals are the things that haven't changed through the decades or the pandemic—even when going at warp speed.▲

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