



CASE

**EASTERN
VARIANT**

“**More than Branding:
Merch-Based
Engagement for
Independent Journalism**”

STUDY

IN SHORT

Eastern Variant launched a merchandise initiative to diversify income amid shrinking donor funding. By designing culturally resonant products and partnering with local entrepreneurs, the outlet not only generated new revenue but also deepened audience engagement and supported small businesses in eastern Ukraine.

ABOUT THE NEWS OUTLET

Eastern Variant is the largest independent regional media outlet covering Ukraine’s eastern Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Operating since 2008 and relaunched online in 2019, the newsroom specializes in solutions journalism, investigative reporting, fact-checking, and civic engagement. Amid the ongoing war, it serves displaced communities and residents in occupied territories through mirror sites and a direct information hotline. Since 2023, Eastern Variant has been developing a donor community to support its sustainability. In 2025, it launched a merchandise initiative — building on that donor base as a new, values-driven way for audiences to support independent journalism.



PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Eastern Variant sought to diversify its revenue streams after the sudden loss of donor funding by launching a merchandise initiative that aligned with its values, strengthened community ties, and offered audiences a meaningful way to support independent journalism in eastern Ukraine.



IMPLEMENTED SOLUTIONS

The team launched an online merchandise shop featuring culturally resonant products and applied design-thinking principles by conducting interviews with local entrepreneurs to shape partnership models. By collaborating with small businesses and promoting the products organically through its own channels, Eastern Variant generated new income and strengthened audience engagement.

WHY THIS PROJECT?

Eastern Variant had long considered this idea but decided to act when USAID support suddenly came to an end earlier this year. Facing the need for new funding sources and working with a limited budget, the team moved forward and launched the online shop.

HOW DID APPLYING DESIGN THINKING PRINCIPLES HELP?

To strengthen the merchandise initiative, Eastern Variant applied design thinking by conducting in-depth interviews with potential partners — small and medium-sized businesses in eastern Ukraine. These conversations helped identify barriers and concerns that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. By listening closely to entrepreneurs, the team gained insight into how to shape its strategy for future collaborations.

DID EASTERN VARIANT'S APPROACH CHANGE ENGAGEMENT WITH ITS AUDIENCE IN ANY WAY?

Yes. When Eastern Variant launched its “Okroshka” T-shirts and “Skhidna” scarves, the response was overwhelmingly positive. Without spending anything on advertising, 85% of the first batch of T-shirts sold out almost immediately. Audience feedback confirmed that products rooted in local culture resonated far more than simply branding items with the outlet's logo.

WHAT CHALLENGES DID EASTERN VARIANT ENCOUNTER AND HOW DID IT ADDRESS THEM?

Finding partners to sell their products on the Eastern Variant platform was difficult. Small businesses often lacked the production capacity to expand to a new sales channel, while medium-sized businesses already had established systems and saw new markets as risky. To address this, Eastern Variant engaged directly with entrepreneurs through interviews, which provided both clarity and a foundation for adjusting partnership strategies moving forward.

HOW WAS EASTERN VARIANT'S PROJECT RECEIVED BY ITS AUDIENCE?

The new merchandise quickly attracted interest and support. The T-shirts sold well, and though the scarves were less promoted, they also drew attention. The store's expansion to include products from a local woodworking family business, WoodLikeUA, added further value by supporting other small entrepreneurs while strengthening Eastern Variant's position in the community.



WHAT INSIGHTS OR LESSONS DID EASTERN VARIANT GAIN FROM THIS PROJECT?

No matter how appealing your products are, people will not know about them unless you share actively. Promotion is essential. Social media is especially effective — using your own channels, adding humor, or creating lighthearted posts can make content go viral and bring attention to your merchandise.



WHAT DOES EASTERN VARIANT PLAN ON DOING NEXT?

Eastern Variant plans to continue expanding its collaboration with local businesses in eastern Ukraine. By doing so, it not only diversifies its revenue streams but also provides visibility and income opportunities to small entrepreneurs in the region.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD CONTEXT GIVE TO OTHER JOURNALISTS OR ORGANISATIONS CONSIDERING A SIMILAR PATH?

If you are considering selling merchandise, start as soon as possible. It can become a valuable and creative part of your overall monetization strategy. While it may feel difficult in the beginning, the effort is worthwhile in the long run.

