

# GOODY GOODY GUMDROPS!

## CO-WORKING AT THE CANDY FACTORY

By Rob Hudson / Photography by Matthew Lester

I work from home and when it becomes unbearable, I spend my days roaming coffee shops and restaurants desperate for a plug socket and praying that the wifi isn't already overloaded by people like the creepy tousled redhead in the corner, cackling to herself while the sounds of Warcraft battles echo from her unwieldy laptop. And I cringe from an aching bladder, thanks to the three coffee drinks I felt obliged to buy since I'm squatting in a business establishment, after all. Risk the restroom and sacrifice my \$1,500 laptop to anyone who might snatch it while I'm indisposed? No thanks.

So I went to the pre-opening of this Candy Factory, a gutted old industrial space with lots of promise. Work tables, exposed infrastructure, and bare walls. Enthusiastic young people are milling, laughing, and brimming with enthusiasm. Hip proprietors are spinning visions of artistic glory and promises of what is to come when the space is finished.

Not for me. Too happy? Too optimistic? Too inexpensive? This will never work as a business. It's one grand opening away from a farewell party. Besides, they're artists. I'm not. I crunch data and teach writing. Not the creative kind, the business kind. I shambled from the hip 300 Block of North Queen Street and its fancy crepes and bee bop to my work-at-home lair at the in-laws with its Red Baron frozen pizza and cold tater tots.

Four months and 120 episodes of *Bernie Mac* later, I'm not even pretending to work. I'm Googling "coworking" again and finding the Candy Factory, not only alive, but thriving. I'm ready to give this a try. With *Fine Living Lancaster* behind me, I scoot the Camry downtown and wedge it into a metered spot next to 323 North Queen, home of my new home?

The glass entrance door sports an 8.5x11 printout with a definition of coworking and a welcome. Inside, a short, plain

hallway leads to the real entrance. It's bright! Artwork covers the walls in various patterns; color-coordinated chairs and hanging lanterns spin red and white like starlight mints. It's so ... open. I don't feel constrained by a two-foot by two-foot coffee table or a dark living room.

The faces of a gang of ten, sitting at a long worktable, brighten as they watch me enter. "Hi!" someone shouts, and Not Bad Design partner and Candy Factory co-owner Max Phillips emerges from the back room full of warm smiles and cheer. He offers me a coffee ("It's Lonely Monk, brewed locally by an actual monk!"). We talk in the back, where the premium members have open desks, but where anyone is allowed. "We're not about exclusivity and traditional boundaries," says Max.

Max shares the same experience I had finding an affordable and effective place to work. Coffee shops, shared traditional offices, and the dreaded home workplace. "I'm just terrible at it. Distracted. Unmotivated. No sense of purpose." He sighs. "Where do you go when you can't afford something nice but you don't want to look unprofessional?"

One answer is coworking. Per the official Wikipedia, "coworking helps independent professionals and those with workplace flexibility work better together than they do





alone.” Max and his partner, Anne Kirby, were hip to the idea, had a willing network of people, but no place to go. When the Candy Factory space became available, Max and his creatively minded team (drawn primarily from the ranks of the CHL), jumped. “We had six weeks for everything” says Max, “financing, painting, furniture, membership agreements, tours, advertising.”

Four months and 38 members later, the Candy Factory transcends affordable: Anyone with ten dollars (plus two bucks for parking) can come in for a day. For \$35, it’s one day a week (32 hours per month). Even the most expensive plan (\$200 for unlimited monthly access) is hundreds of dollars cheaper than a real office.

What do you get for such a pittance? A spot at a spacious worktable with comfortable chairs (I tested these), business-class wifi (15 megs down, 5 up), terrific Lonely Monk coffee, a fridge, cold storage, and more. “Why so cheap?” I ask. “We don’t make money doing this. We’re designers; the Candy Factory is a self-sustaining community.” This means members give back; they contribute a monthly fee but also books, coffee, paper, resources, and expertise. People don’t just work in the Candy Factory, they work on the Candy Factory. In fact, members recently gathered on a Saturday to paint the place.

Paradoxically, the more you pay, the more responsibility you have. Senior members are community leaders; they open and close the space, greet prospective members, and handle their needs. It’s not unusual for a Premium member to walk a first-timer (like me) through the tables, desks, artwork, and delicious coffee, explaining coworking, the Candy Factory, and the benefits. Regular coworkers also pitch in to welcome new members and explain the space.

In this way, coworkers have a stake in their community; they help it grow. But what exactly is the community? What if I just want to work? “We have people who put their headphones on and work



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## Do you?

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quietly, non stop, and that's okay," says Max, "but most people work together in some way, even if they aren't working on the same things."

Steve Ulrich, owner of Wilkum Studios (and a Lite member), explains: "I can sit and stare at a page for hours and beat my head against the wall or I can come here and say, 'what do you think?' and in 30 seconds I'll have an honest opinion." He describes a recent project to change his logo. In ten minutes he had the opinion of an artist, a graphic designer, and an insurance company CEO. "The artists gave me the aesthetic, and the insurance guy gave me the non-nonsense first impression." The cost? "Nothing. We help each other out. This kind of expertise would cost me at least \$1,000 in the private market."

Insurance guy? At a cool, creative place to work?

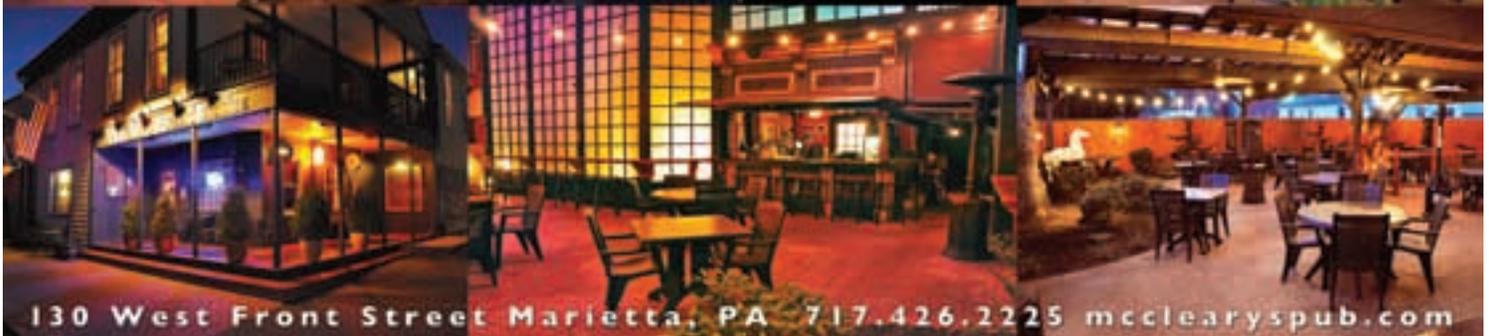
"Sure," says Ulrich. "In fact, I'm not a creative. I do professional video work, which can be numbing and hyper-detailed." He chews on his lower lip. "I kind of wonder if people don't think it's a crazy artist hang out place."

True. The place looks like an art gallery, rows of photos on one side, paintings on another, and still more themed paintings on another wall. And yes, there are rows of glowing Apple logos from Macbooks being moused and keyed by laid-back looking dudes and equally chill ladies.

Strangely, this gives an unlikely member and independent tax preparer "Dave the Tax Guy" a fantastic energy. "The creative types here are great and the music is just terrific." He pauses and adjusts his shirt and tie. We both listen to the ambient crooning of Alex Parks covering "Mad World."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not creative! I'm an IBM in a sea of Apple," he says, "I'm black and white." He taps on a stack of printouts full of figures in front of him. "Black and white tax forms." He gestures to the small crowd at the end of the table. "I know taxes. They know websites and marketing and design."

"In fact," he says, "we help each other professionally. Mike Reinmiller and Lauren Wood of Catalyst do my marketing and social media. Max and Anne (Not Bad Design) build my website. Matt (Lester) just shot a hundred pictures of me for my site and brochures." He leans closer and whispers: "This shirt and tie are just for the photos."



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Although Dave is happy for the business (“I hope these folks need me during tax time!”), he isn’t here to solicit work. I wondered about that, imagining obnoxious hunters dropping ten bucks to throw their business cards around and hawk their services. “The community simply wouldn’t tolerate it,” Max says.

Business, networks and collaboration just happen as a result of the open environment. Competitors share advice with one another. Though normally reluctant to share ideas, especially in a bad economy where one customer can mean the difference between staying viable or going out of business, marketers are working together. “We’re all working at the same tables at the same level. Exchanging ideas helps us hone our own skills,” Reinmiller explains. And sometimes that coworking leads to unlikely partners. Max and Anne do website design, social media, and marketing, like Catalyst. Because of their rapport with Reinmiller, they decided to share part of a recent contract with Catalyst. Together, the two companies form the marketing and website design department of “Dave the Tax Guy.”

It’s not unusual to pull from the community talent. “We go to the Candy Factory members as our first choice of contractors because they’re in house and we can work with them closely,” Ann says. Indeed, the Candy Factory coworkers share a special professional respect, and a level of partnership that can lead to more work and large projects they couldn’t do alone. One such project, won by Not Bad Design, engaged a domestic violence shelter in Philadelphia for a major rebranding campaign. Anne and Max rapidly assembled a Candy Factory project team: Steve Zimmerman, a content/PR writer, and Matt Lester, a professional photographer. “It’s nice that we’re all in close quarters,” says Lester, while whizzing through photos on a gigantic LCD monitor. A few feet away, Zimmerman and Rishell peck away furiously, within easy reach for questions, noshing, or a therapeutic game of darts or foosball at a corner table.

The Candy Factory is not just a place for coworkers, but a canvas for local artists who aren’t established or wouldn’t qualify to be in a traditional gallery. “We’re not a gallery, per se. We don’t charge the artists to show their work and we don’t take a commission from any sales they get,” says Anne. Although the work is technically for sale, the pieces, which rotate monthly, create an environment, an impression, and an atmosphere of creativity for coworking. Coworkers may also display their work. Premium member Matt Lester, a professional photographer, showcases his artistic pictures along the right wall of the main work room. Next month the SPLINTER: A Pop-Up Gallery will claim the space.

By the end of the day (I’d been there for six hours), I’d not only spoken to coworkers and enjoyed the colors and impressions, but also cranked out a productive four hours of labor at a table. I left my laptop out while I visited Sa La Thai. I went to the bathroom. I laughed and carried on with Macs and PCs. And I signed a contract. 🍷

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