

BUSINESSDIMENSIONS

FINANCIAL STRATEGIES FOR THE ENTREPRENEUR



How to wow

Connecting with clients and customers, pandemic-style

Pre-pandemic, connecting with clients and customers was limited only by your own imagination and budget. Now the typical ways you might have once wowed clients, like dinner at a new restaurant or concert tickets, are out the window. And that's good news. No longer does big, fancy or expensive hold the most weight. Instead, everyone is looking for authentic connection as we all navigate uncharted waters, from online schooling to how to get our pet groomed. In this new environment, care, connection and communication are key.

RETHINKING CONNECTION

Companies from big to small are thinking about how to connect with clients and customers in new and creative ways. Small gestures with big impact, demonstrating solidarity that we're all in this together, and offering special gifts for kids are just some of the approaches companies are taking.

Zappos, the online shoe retailer known for its high service standards since its founding in 1999, opened an "Anything" customer service hotline, email and Twitter feed. On standby are representatives who will answer any questions about anything at all, or just chat. Brian Kalma, an executive at Zappos, says they actually plan to keep the service running post-pandemic, stating in *The New York Times*, "We're seeing signals that this is something we may want to maintain as the world reopens." Customers can ask about things like how to take a great photo, what moving companies are near them, or more practical fare like finding a local hospital or locating household supplies.

Salesforce, a tech firm in San Francisco, launched a video series called B-Well Together for customers and anyone else who wants to tune in. These videos feature notable experts on everything from pandemic parenting to the art of compas-

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How to wow (cont.)

LOW-COST OPTIONS TO CONNECT

Share online resources that have helped you get through this time – inspiring videos, podcasts or wellness articles come to mind. Tip: Put it in a personal email when you connect one-on-one with clients, or send to your entire email list with a personal note.

C. Krueger’s cookies has launched a “We’re All in This Together” line of cookies with everything from “Virtual Hug” to “Stronger Together” messages. A two-pack in cute packaging is under \$10.

Deliver food from local restaurants to clients’ homes or send them a meal delivery gift certificate. Everyone needs help with meal planning and you’ll support other local businesses as well. Tip: If you own a restaurant, consider randomly surprising a customer with free food delivery and post the surprise on social media.

sion. Drew Barrymore offers her perspective on keeping her business running during the pandemic and strategies for being at home with her kids. Jane Goodall offers her thoughts on the climate crisis and the pandemic, and there are practical tips from leadership strategist Greg McKeown on learning how to focus on what’s truly essential.

A Midwestern convenience retailer called Sheetz launched a Kidz Meal Bagz program, where kids get a free, healthy bag lunch of a turkey sandwich, chips and a drink when they come into the store. They averaged 80,000 lunches a week across all of their 600 stores. The outpouring of loyalty on social media was overwhelming – harried parents could take one meal prep off their plates, and kids who might be missing school lunches benefited as well.

TRIED AND TRUE

Now is the time to use all those traditional ways of reaching out to clients and customers just to connect – calling people on the phone or sending an email simply to ask how they are doing. If you have an email list, consider organizing an email campaign around checking in and encourage responses by asking customers to reply and share what’s on their minds.

MAKE IT EASY

Consider how you can make life easier for clients and customers, or maybe just more fun. This might mean pivoting your services – e.g., dining in may become a meal-kit pickup service or delivery. It could also mean a fun and simple gift like shipping ice cream to clients so they can have their own ice cream social with their families at home. Tip: Create a video chat where you can all weigh in on your favorite flavor.

CRM 101

If you don’t have one, now’s the time to create a simple customer relationship management (CRM) system – this is a way to track your contacts with clients and customers and what kinds of connections you are making and when. While there are dozens of CRM software and cloud-based services out there, you can also start simple with an Excel spreadsheet. Create columns not just for the names, phone numbers and email addresses of your clients, but potential conversation starters you can use when you reach out.

SAFETY STILL TOP OF MIND

By now you have a safety protocol in place for your business, and you’ve communicated out to your clients and customers what you are doing to keep them safe. Of course, it’s still important. Build on your efforts by asking clients how they experience your safety protocols and service. Begin by asking what changes they’d like to see and include them in the evolving conversation. Tip: Social media or anonymous comment cards are low-cost ways to continue strengthening your relationships and find out what customers want. ■

Sources: people.com; zappos.com; salesforce.com; hbr.org; wral.com; zapier.com

NEXT STEPS

Thinking through how to wow for your business:

- Ask yourself and your team, how can you make life easier for your clients and customers? This one question can spark myriad wow moments for clients.
- Start a customer relationship management system. The simpler you make it, the more apt you and your team are to use it.
- Look at the current ways you are communicating with clients – how are you demonstrating care and connection?

The workplace of the future

Will COVID-19 permanently change where, and how, we work?

The nature of work, offices and productivity has been entirely transformed by the coronavirus – prestigious law firms are empty as ghost towns; companies like Citi, Okta, Google and Twitter have said they're not bringing workers back on campus full time anytime soon or are relying on a rotating schedule; cities are emptying as remote workers migrate to smaller, less expensive locales. Small businesses and entrepreneurs are now looking at streamlining every part of their businesses as well, and rethinking their monthly real estate budgets too. There are three ways in which the nature of work could look very different – the disappearance of offices; cafes and stores as showrooms instead of gathering places; and the internet firmly embedded into our everyday world.



NO MORE OFFICE

According to a report by Flexjobs and Global Workplace Analytics, even just part-time remote work has been shown to save companies around \$11,000 a year per employee in facilities costs, absences, turnover, continuity and productivity. With cost savings like these, it's interesting to think about the idea of the office going away completely. As we mentioned above, several major firms have already chosen this path. Freelancers are now considering being digital nomads – traveling to different locations during the year to do their work once allowed. And countries like Barbados, Estonia and Bermuda are welcoming the creative class with programs and short-term visas. What will the world look like with connected ecosystems of workers in far flung locales instead of centralized offices?



DINING COMES TO YOU

Restaurants and small service-based businesses have been forced to pivot quickly, suddenly relying heavily on third-party services to keep their businesses afloat. “In troubling times, you have to come up with an answer,” Jeffery Thomas from Sweet Potato Sensations, a small business in Detroit, says in USA Today. “If you don't evolve, you're not successful.” They, like so many other similar small businesses, are working to seamlessly integrate Uber Eats, DoorDash and Grubhub into their business and website. Imagine cafes and stores only as showrooms or show places.

Already we've seen food trucks rise to meet this on-demand, curbside pickup culture, and restaurants downsizing to just a commercial kitchen and pickup window, known as “ghost kitchens.” These are set to account for a possible \$300 million in yearly sales in the next five years, according to Restaurant Business magazine. Outdoor dining – even in colder temps – will be the new normal, with “igloo” table heaters or propane outdoor heaters for those braving the cold.



THE INTERNET IN YOUR REFRIGERATOR

From supply chain to healthcare, the Internet of Things (IoT) stands poised to facilitate a post-COVID-19 world.

From refrigerators that reorder your favorite work-from-home snacks when you run low, to sensors that beep when you are less than six feet apart, IoT will be popping up in unexpected ways more than ever. Already healthcare providers are utilizing IoT through wearables – bracelets that patients wear to alert nurses on everything from temperature to when they are touching their faces. 5G-enabled robots are delivering food and supplies to COVID-19 wards in hospitals – might they be used to make curbside pickup easier?

Accounting apps like Wave or Freshbooks pull your accounting information from multiple sources, allowing you to see financial data in real time. You may have had to quickly integrate payment processing and delivery service apps already due to the pandemic. Imagine a year from now when all that data is being processed in an IoT app and you are analyzing and forecasting sales in real time. ■

NEXT STEPS

Things to consider for the future:

- What impact would these changes have on your business or your customers?
- If these changes are permanent, think about new marketing strategies you might need to deploy.
- Sit down with your team and ask them where they see things going, and make a plan to capture any new revenue opportunities that might be opened up as a result.



Budgeting in a pandemic world

Reviewing your finances can help prepare your business for future disruptions

If you are like most small businesses, 2020 has been a year of wild fluctuation in budgets and planning. While daily operations may have been one way at the start of the new year, by March and April the entire landscape had changed with the advent of COVID-19 and the ensuing shifts in state and local regulations.

Changing revenue streams, temporary shutdowns and being forced to pivot quickly are all part of the everyday world of doing business these days. And while being adept, resilient and shifting with changing market conditions are normal for every small business, COVID-19 has brought new meaning to being nimble, especially with budgets.

If you have made it thus far, pat yourself on the back, but know that the coming months or even years could matter even more to the strength of your business. Budgeting to reflect the new realities of daily operations may mean all the difference.

FINANCIAL FORECASTING

When it comes to budgeting in a chaotic environment where you're not sure what revenue streams will be, looking at cash flow is job number one. If you have never utilized financial forecasting tools, now is the time to do so. Your advisor has specialized software that can do this and stress test your revenue stream, but even a simple Excel spreadsheet can help you look at the future in multiple ways. Financial forecasting tools can also allow you to run hypothetical scenarios and make contingency plans for each one, so you can adjust quickly in any new landscape. While you may not be able to predict the future, having an adjustable plan in place can provide peace of mind.

REAL ESTATE

Another budget item to consider is your real estate footprint. Are you leasing or do you own your commercial space? Does it make sense to sublease your space or possibly downsize your space?

Now is a good time to look ahead and consider the space you absolutely need for your staff and everyday operations, and think about other options if you have extra space. Some ideas could include inviting a partner, client or even a vendor you closely work with to share space – and the cost – or opening up part of your space for coworking, where solo entrepreneurs safely share office space and common functions. Reach out to your network and you may also find other small businesses who are figuring out creative ways to reduce monthly real estate costs.

EMERGENCY FUNDS

Finally, shoring up emergency funds is a must-do for all small businesses during the pandemic. Ensuring three to six months of continued operations in the face of another shutdown is a good goal. Check out your insurance options with your advisor and make sure any disruption insurance is up to par. Get a clear picture of exactly what your current insurance will cover and what you'll need to file claims. Do you need to allocate funds to bolster your current insurance coverage? Consider all the options.

Keeping focused on your long-term goals and preparing as best you can to weather unexpected scenarios could add longevity and sustainability to your business vision. ■

Sources: dailyherald.com; bizjournals.com; forbes.com; bench.co

NEXT STEPS

Three ways you can take action to plan ahead for business disruptions:

- Check your insurance coverage.
- Talk to your advisor about long-term planning for your business.
- Consider creative real estate options to reduce your monthly costs.