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ON LEARNING TO ADAPT

> It's hard to find the words to describe the last several months. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed just about every aspect of our business. It can be overwhelming to get through a day sometimes, let alone think about how we're going to adapt to the future. But I think it's important, for the health of our individual businesses and the overall industry, to be thinking in that direction now — and I believe there are some important lessons to learn.

The first is: The pandemic has already changed consumer behavior. Before the pandemic, my parents, who are both in their 70s, rarely bought anything online. This spring, though, they bought almost everything they needed online because of their local stay-at-home orders. Online shopping became very normal for them, and guess what? Now, they like it! They overcame the mental and tech barriers, no longer fear using their credit card online, and they plan to continue this practice after things return to normal. They have learned new lessons they will continue to use.

I believe that their experience is not unique and that this pandemic will shift the mindset of shoppers. I think people will continue to want a convenient and reduced-contact way to buy and receive their purchases. This is a huge opportunity for florists: Our shop's ability to quickly implement and communicate our contact-free methods of shopping and delivery had a huge effect on both convincing our customers to continue to buy and in raising our sales back to near normal levels. We also obtained new customers.

Something else I'm taking away from this experience: Change is the new normal. We have endured some hard times at our business, but nothing like this. Even once we came up with a plan on how to move through the spring, we faced challenges. We still do! Government restrictions keep changing. We worry about customers' and employees' responses to policies and procedures.

As a result, we are keeping our plan fluid. Throughout this period, we've worked hard to be transparent with our

staff and keep them informed of our plans, even those we had to furlough. Letting our team know that we had a plan, what that plan was and when it changed, and also listening to their concerns, helped us lead our team through this time.

A third lesson I'm focusing on: financial planning. Unfortunately, many in our industry will not return to business or survive this pandemic. I think the most critical issue to survive is debt management. Debt is like an anchor around your leg that causes you to drown when the business seas get rough. Businesses that survive will likely be the ones that have learned to minimize debt and to have a good amount of operating capital in the bank.

It's also a critical time for all of us to review what and how we are selling. We need to make sure we are offering the products and services that consumers are looking for and developing new products as necessary — and that we are making it easy for customers to support our businesses by having great, mobile-friendly websites. My best marketing ideas have come from paying close attention. When I realized how stressed people were — and how much they missed things like a trip to the spa — we created spa-inspired designs. When customers needed a way to celebrate birthdays, we connected with a local bakery to deliver cakes and flowers.

These are unprecedented times, yes, but we can start drawing on these lessons and getting our notes together. If we commit to staying open-minded and flexible — if we're willing to learn and grow and try new things — we can come out of this hard time stronger, and ready for the next challenge, whatever it may be and whenever it may come. 🌸



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