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Opinion: How retailers and other small businesses can survive coronavirus pandemic

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Toni Feret sets up a zoom meeting to teach her power yoga class at Wellness in Motion Studio on Thursday, March 19, 2020.

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Note: The Miami Herald and McClatchy News Sites are offering most coverage of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic to all, with no payment required. We want to ensure our readers can make critical decisions for themselves and their families. To continue supporting vital reporting like this, please consider a [digital subscription](#). For more coverage, subscribe to our daily [coronavirus newsletter](#).

Even before the global pandemic, Americans were signing up for online classes, streaming their videos, and ordering their take out food, and just about everything else online. As far back as the 1990s, a little startup based in Scotts Valley, Calif., went into battle with the giant Blockbuster chain, offering customers the ease and flexibility of ordering their DVDs through the mail and returning them whenever they felt like it, with no late fees and no hassle. In the final quarter of 2019, Netflix had over 167 million paying streaming subscribers. Adding in the partnership deals it has with every major studio and network, its total revenue amounted to more than \$20.15 billion. Blockbuster declared bankruptcy over a decade ago, in 2010.

Amazon's online service put countless neighborhood bookstores and national chains out of business, seemingly over night. Barnes & Noble is still hanging on, but it's shuttered some 150 outlets over the past decade. We've also been watching the slow death of American malls, with over 8,600 retailers closing in 2019 alone.

Given the time pressures from work, family life, and long commutes, it's no wonder Americans are turning away from the hassles of traffic, parking, long lines, and limited inventory and opting for the ease and efficiency of online shopping. But as social creatures people have always drawn to opportunities to connect and share, which is why the biggest trend in retail has been to offer more in the way of programming and experiences to generate foot traffic, whether that is providing customers with the opportunity to confer with an expert stylist, holding a 'meet the designer' event, or a trunk show. You need more than just static inventory to entice people to interrupt their busy lives and visit you in person.

This global pandemic is not to blame for a trend that was already in place — it has only accelerated it. While government stimulus and small business loans, financing and subsidies may provide some small businesses with a measure of relief, many won't have the cash flow, the savings, or the time to wait. Rents, suppliers, and staffs have to be paid.

So how can not just retailers, but restaurants, bars, galleries, book stores, hair and nail salons, florists, and fitness centers move quickly to mitigate their losses and stay afloat over the next difficult months?

Here are a few ideas:

Restaurants: While you may need two table turns a night to make a profit, building up your take-out business can generate some needed cash flow. For 25-30% commission on your sales, there are numerous food delivery services to sign with, including Uber Eats, GrubHub, Postmates, Muchery and Eat24. UberEats surveys show that 60% of their operators generated

incremental sales and 25% of their customers said that they will spend more money on delivery orders. They expected to see a 77% rise in food delivery sales from 2017 to 2022 — and that was before the pandemic. By posting pictures of photogenic dishes, social media can help promote daily specials, and act as a community bulletin board. There are also many apps like Restaurant Manager that can help you with your marketing efforts.

Bars: No one wants to live in a ghost town with only Amazon Prime trucks on the street. Your customers will come back when you are allowed to open your doors again, but there are things you can do to sustain your connection with them in the meantime. Think creatively. Some cities are allowing bars to serve and even deliver takeout cocktails. You can showcase your bartenders in online mixology classes and even make a little money doing so. Just as Peleton charges workout addicts a monthly fee that allows them to choose their favorite instructors, bartenders can stay connected to their regulars while teaching the vast new marketplace of stuck-at-home parents with screaming children how to mix the perfect margarita, mojito, or old-fashioned.

During the early days of the lockdowns, online gaming companies posted some of their most profitable days ever. Consider opening a virtual bar, where regulars can keep each other company while drinking alone at home, through online apps like Zoom.us, GoToMeeting, FaceTime group chats, Google Hangouts and others. Staying socially connected is imperative to health and wellbeing in times of crisis.



Expert instruction (from structured play to cooking, speech pathology, and manual therapy): After three days of homeschooling my 2- and 4-year-old kids, I found myself scouring the internet for online sessions that could help to entertain and educate them. Parents will pay for the opportunity to lend a semblance of a schedule and structure to the freefall chaos of childcare and work at home. Whether it's learning how to make playdough at home, Spanish or French lessons, yoga, or speech pathology, every manner of expert services can be taken online.

There are numerous apps you can use to run small sessions of five to 10 kids or even one-on-one instruction, among them Twitter Live, Instagram Live, Facebook Live, FaceTime chats, and

Skype. For classroom style, use the Zoom app, which allows up to 100 people to join. Experts have been creating their own YouTube pages with instructional videos for years; you can use them to tease paid custom sessions. Home delivery kits are also a big hit right now, from arts and crafts boxes stuffed with pompoms, feathers, paint and playdough for toddlers to meal boxes on order for families to easily cook at home, with all the ingredients in one box. Accompany them with an Instagram Live session and watch your local sales grow.

Retailers: Whether you have a small shop or work for a major chain, it's time to create an Instagram business account. You can promote your products via live sessions on anything from styling and cleaning out your wardrobe to accessorizing. This seamless shopping tool allows your customers to buy products without leaving the app, generating trusted sales and keeping your customers coming back for more. It's available in the U.S. and Canada and several other countries. Here's how you can get started:

<https://www.facebook.com/business/instagram/shopping/guide>

Catering: Caterers can expand their trade to include sheltering-in-place parents who are juggling work and childcare, elderly people who can't go out, and individuals who are not great chefs and need prepared meals. Market yourself via email blasts, social media, and connections you can forge with big condos and nursing homes, and offer a wide range of food options for individuals with special diets, from vegan to diabetic-friendly low carb options. Make it easy for your customers by taking orders through text and email, accepting Venmo or Apple Pay.

Self-care hair and nail salons: Some salons are offering simple hair services like root touch ups with in-home kits accompanied by FaceTime tutorials. The profit margins on things like candles and beauty products are huge; if you ever thought of releasing your own product line, now is the time. As with expert instruction, self-care classes can also be offered for a fee. Rotate your clients' favorite stylists for daily sessions and allow followers to ask questions.

Gyms and exercising: Peleton and the Mirror aren't the only companies that can provide virtual fitness classes — with a webcam and a little planning, you can too. Check out aloomoves.com to see their expert instructors teach yoga, barre, Pilates, meditation and more. Or go to masterclass.com to learn from an award-winning gymnast. Physical real estate is no longer a necessity to gain a following. Invest in a great web cam, stick to a regular schedule, and start live streaming classes now.

The challenges ahead for many small businesses are daunting, but necessity is the mother of invention. As history has shown us countless times, the most disruptive eras give birth to the greatest discoveries and innovations.

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