

How Your Local Business Can Be a Helper

“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother’s words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world.” – Fred Rogers

This quote is one I find myself turning to frequently these days as a local SEO. It calls to mind my irreplaceable neighborhood grocer. On my last essential run to their store, they not only shared a stashed 4-pack of bath tissue with me, but also stocked their market with local distillery-produced hand sanitizer which I was warned will reek of bourbon, but will get the job done.

When times are hard, finding helpers comes as such a relief. Even the smallest acts that a local business does to support physical and mental health can be events customers remember for years to come.

While none of us gets to live in Mister Rogers’ idealized neighborhood, the adaptations I’m seeing local businesses and organizations make to sustain communities during COVID-19 are a meaningful expression of caring worthy of his humanitarian vision. Almost any brand, large or small, has the chance to be a good neighbor. Please use the following industry and platform examples to spark local business creativity when it’s needed most so that brands you care about can stay helpfully productive during the public health emergency.

Inspirational local business pivots and plans

Everyone at Moz is full of admiration for the way different industries are responding in a time that's not business-as-usual. My thanks to the many teammates who contributed to this roundup of examples we've been personally encountering, and we hope you'll find an actionable path for your business here.

Food and hospitality

1. From fancy to fundamental, famed Seattle restaurant Canlis quickly transitioned from fine dining to offering drive-thru bagels, family meal delivery, and community-supported agriculture (CSA) boxes from local farms.
2. From pizza place to pantry, multiple restaurants and caterers are putting their supply chain to work for their customers. California Pizza Kitchen is delivering meal kits and pantry staples as a pop-up market.
3. Caterers with big hearts like Kay Catering asked parents whose schoolchildren she normally feeds whether they'd be willing to donate unused lunch fees so her company could cook

for families in need. Through the generosity of these parents, Kay Kim is now serving dinner to the residents at the Sand Point Public Housing Center at Magnuson Park as part of Seattle Public Schools' overall effort to feed its students.

4. Pike Place Market on your doorstep is the offering of Savor Seattle, which has shifted from offering tasting tours to aggregating the iconic products of an entire marketplace for home delivery and curbside pickup.

5. To keep grocery shelves stocked, Santa Rosa, California food manufacturer Amy's Kitchen has ramped up production by erecting tent kitchens with social distancing so that the company's canned soups can be produced in greater quantities. Meanwhile, distilleries across the country have converted operations to manufacture of hand sanitizer.

6. Community-support agriculture may well see a boom with the appeal of boxes of fresh, local foods delivered to your door, allowing customers to entirely forego trips to grocery stores. Farm stands have become extra precious community resources. Role models like Heron Pond Farm in New Hampshire are accepting SNAP payments and providing discounts to SNAP shoppers.

7. Caring for our most vulnerable community members, grocery stores large and small are setting senior shopping hours. Raley's is offering curbside pickup of \$20 "Senior Essential Bags" filled with fresh and dry goods. Kroger-owned stores are donating \$3 million to deploy groceries to food-insecure communities via their Zero Hunger/Zero Waste program.

8. Looking to the future, Instagram co-founder Mike Krieg has launched SaveOurFaves.com, an San Francisco Bay Area directory of restaurants hosting the purchase of gift cards to keep cherished eating spots afloat. These gift cards, meant to be used later, are in the nature of a small business loan.

9. Serving up support for displaced restaurant workers, Food

Network star and restaurateur Guy Fieri has created a relief fund. This Bay Area celebrity has repeatedly come to the rescue in disasters, cooking for impacted communities, and now, offering \$500 in cash to unemployed restaurant employees on a first-come, first-served basis.

10. Hotels are housing health care workers in need of lodging, with some 6,500 properties participating in the Hotels for Hope initiative nationwide. Meanwhile, in San Francisco alone, more than 30 hotels have offered housing for homeless Americans in response to local and state government requests.

Home services

1. Contractors put safety first by implementing new sanitary protocols when making home visits. Roto-Rooter is doing an outstanding job of explaining how plumbers will wear protective equipment, practice social distancing, and use disinfectant. They are also publishing how-to videos for simple home plumbing and offering advice regarding sanitary products. HVAC brand Vaughan Comfort Services created this section of their website to explain their enhanced safety measures.

2. Cleaning services are making tough decisions about whether to remain operational. Some, like Molly Maid, are still cleaning residences while implementing increased safety practices, but others are diversifying into the commercial cleaning space, cleaning offices that are temporarily empty. Meanwhile, professional biohazard cleaning services like Aftermath are creating new pages on their websites to describe their in-demand practices for disinfecting impacted properties.

3. Computer repair services are adapting, where state regulations allow, to 100% mobile operations and are fixing issues over the phone where possible. One independent shop, DreamNet Computers, created this page to explain how they are sanitizing devices being picked up or dropped off, and how they can repair some computers remotely if they can connect to the Internet.

4. The landscaping services market is haphazard at the moment, with some professionals concerned that state-by-state regulations are not clear enough for their industry, while others are embracing virtual meetings and 3D modeling with the thought that people working from home will now be more invested in having livable outdoor spaces.

Professional and instructional services

1. Much of medicine has become telemedicine and therapy has become teletherapy, barring cases which require direct one-on-one contact. Practitioners able to navigate privacy regulations can still provide vital patient support. Bridges Therapy & Wellness Center of Fairfax, Virginia is just one example of a practice putting online appointment availability front and center on its website. Check out how the telehealth platform PatientPop has quickly pivoted their roll out for

medical clients.

2. Movement, meditation, and multiple forms of self-care have made a quick transition online. Religious institutions are putting their services on the web, from Pope Francis celebrating Mass at the Vatican, to Ann Arbor's Temple Beth Emeth observing virtual Shabbat and the Imams of the Islamic Center of America broadcasting live, daily lectures from Dearborn, Michigan. I've found Indigenous invitations to prayer for healing especially moving in these times. Meanwhile, dance studio Dance Church has thousands of folks boogying to their livestreams, and yoga, martial arts, fine arts, and music instructors have shifted to both public and private online sessions. Check out the business support being offered by Your Yoga Alliance to instructors needing to transition operations.

3. Banks and financial institutions are responding by offering various forms of relief including deferring or waiving fees, and providing some forms of mortgage assistance. With concerns over ATM contamination, some advisors in the financial industry are suggesting customers bring their own sanitizer, gloves, and a stylus to transactions.

4. Realtors can manage most meetings virtually, and thanks to technology like Klear and ImmoViewer, buyers can get a very good idea of what properties look like and even handle closings online. However, it's vital to follow state and local regulations regarding home showings.

5. The National Association of Bar Executives offers abundant guidance for legal professionals via their pandemic preparedness resource. They are hosting roundtables, publishing lists of tech vendors appropriate to the industry, and highlighting government and philanthropic news.

6. Personal care professionals may be struggling most, with hair stylists, manicurists, massage therapists, and related

practitioners having no way to replicate their work via the Internet. Kaleidoscope Salon in Chattanooga, Tennessee held a fundraiser offering a prize of a full year of hair services in order to meet its payroll during its closure. Professionals seeking to maintain client relationships during this pause in business can head to YouTube, like R's Just Hair Salon's chief hairstylist Ruchi Sawhney, to demo do-it-yourself beauty tips. Stay-at-home orders are making it harder for people to access personal care products. If your salon has inventory, consider curbside pick-up of health and beauty supply kits, as is being offered by Sally Beauty.

Retail

1. Retail is taking a hard hit, and there's no gainsaying this, but vendors who can transition at least part of their operations to e-commerce selling may be able to remain operational simply because the demand is so high now for home delivery. If you are sitting on unsold inventory and are having trouble imagining how to sell it, check out eBay, which recently announced that it is waiving seller fees to help retailers get their products onto the web for sale.

2. Major clothing retailers like Macy's and Kohl's have closed their stores, but continue to sell online. Macy's CEO Jeff Gennette has stated that the fewest employee furloughs have been in their digital operations, and that they hope to start bringing workers back on through a staggered process in the future. Meanwhile, smaller basic clothing retailers like the Vermont Country Store have temporarily shuttered their

premises, but are continuing to ship with the proviso that an overload of orders has slowed down shipping speeds.

3. Electronics retailers are finding their product lines in high demand as all of us seek ways to conduct more of life online. T-Mobile stores may be closed, but they are offering free two-day shipping and have published a whole new section of service resources during the health emergency. Best Buy is offering contactless curbside pickup and delivery. Batteries Plus Bulbs has remained largely operational and is supplying the medical field with essential technology, while also offering curbside pickup to retail customers.

4. Plant nurseries are finding themselves inundated with customers eager to plant food crops in any gardening space they have. In my state of California, agricultural businesses are considered essential. Many nurseries and garden supply shops remain open, but – like the San Francisco Bay Area Sloat Nursery chain – are taking steps to limit the number of customers allowed in at a time, and also offer curbside pickup and delivery. Nurseries should be growing as many veggie starts and stocking as much vegetable seed as possible right now.

5. Home Improvement and hardware stores offering free delivery, like Home Depot, and free curbside pickup, like Ace Hardware, have a good chance of weathering this storm so long as customers can afford to improve their dwellings, in which they are now spending so much more of their time. In a related category, large home furnishings brands like Crate & Barrel are selling online and have their design consultants working from home with clients via phone and web chat.

6. Auto dealers have embraced tech to keep car sales moving. Toyota's SmartPath tool takes customers from inventory search, to applying for a line of credit, to the point where a vehicle can be delivered to your home. I've noticed several dealerships deferring first-month payments to stimulate

purchases. Meanwhile, General Motors has begun producing ventilators at its Kokomo, Indiana facility and face masks at its plant in Warren, Michigan.

Where to publicize what you're doing

Once you've determined how your business can best pivot to continue serving the public, you'll want to update your website to ensure you're communicating your offerings. You should also update your local business listings, as described in the last edition of my column. Beyond this, here is an example-filled list of resources for maximizing publicity:

Blogs

About a decade ago, local SEO experts were strongly promoting the idea of creating hyperlocal blogs to engage communities. Bloggers who were up to the challenge now have platforms in place through which the most recent and useful information can be quickly communicated to neighbors, as in this excellent example of the West Seattle Blog. If your community lacks a hyperlocal resource like this, your business could be of great help in creating one now. If such a blog is already in place, see if your business can contribute content.

Hyperlocal business association sites

If you don't want to go it alone in creating a blog, joining with others in a local business association like the West Seattle Junction or Chamber of Commerce will enable many hands to lighten the work. Community hubs like this one are publishing vital information including PSAs, updates on which businesses offer delivery and pickup, and highlighting local merchants. If your neighborhood has platforms like these, contact them to see how you can contribute content. If no such resources exist, contact your neighboring business owners to discuss what you can create together.

Facebook

If you aren't in a position to build a hyperlocal website or blog right now, Facebook may be your next best option. The Yurok Tribe of California is inspiring in their use of Facebook for continuous dialog with their community. Many tribes are role-modeling how to support one another, and particularly the most vulnerable, in these times. The above example shows how one tribe is phoning its elders and has created a hotline to ensure they're receiving vital services. I came across another example in which a tribe's Facebook post instructed elders to hang something red in their windows if they needed any help from younger members of the community. Now is a good time to double down on Facebook with any supportive information your local business can broadcast. Of note, Facebook is offering \$100 million in small business cash grants and ad credits.

Nextdoor

Nextdoor is a particularly lively community hub and this is a very good time to join it as a business. It should go without saying that publishing anything that could seem self-serving would be a poor choice. Instead, take inspiration from the spirit demonstrated in the above example of a neighborhood converting their Little Free Library into a mini dry goods pantry, or this independent restaurant using Nextdoor to offer a discount to anyone in their industry who may have lost their local job. This is a good, ready-do-go platform for outreach to your community.

Twitter

Check out how the Downtown Business Association of Edmonton is using Twitter to promote virtual local events and a new directory they're building on their website specifically highlighting operational local businesses. The instantaneous communication capacity of Twitter is a resource your company should consider right now, even if you haven't done much tweeting in the past. Follow and share the content of other local businesses to create a stronger community with timely messaging for the public.

Instagram

Instagram is proving extremely helpful in alerting communities to offerings and changes, as in this example of a Richland, Washington cookie cutter manufacturer transitioning operations to produce face shields for medical personnel, and providing DIY instructions for anyone with access to a 3D printer.

Radio

This excellent Los Angeles Times article by Randy Lewis reminds us of how radio remains a strong resource even for those in our community who lack Internet access. People are

tuning the dials for hyperlocal information about the availability of resources, for comfort, and hope. If your business is doing something that would help local customers, consider calling into the nearest radio station to share your story. Obviously, avoid being overly-promotional, and do consider whether this might be a good time to invest a little more in formal radio advertising.

Newspapers

Almost any town with a newspaper is printing abundant information about community resources right now, including lists of operational companies like this one in the Marin Independent Journal. Reach out with your news and volunteer to be interviewed to spread the word about how your business is serving the community. These unstructured citations from trusted online news outlets can help local searchers find your business and even boost your rankings. Consider paid news ad spots as well, if it's in your budget.

Local television and video media

[embedded content]

I thought this multi-location appliance company, Airport Home Appliances, did an excellent job with their local TV ad spot regarding their current operations, which they also posted to YouTube. Your audience is mainly homebound now, and Nielsen

finds that local TV is becoming the preferred choice for accessing news and information in the United States. If it's in your budget, even a basic local television ad could reach many customers at this time. If now isn't a good time for your brand to invest, get something up on YouTube and embed it on your website.

Local, regional, or industry podcasts

If your area or business category is lucky enough to have a good podcast, reaching out to the podcaster to share what your business is doing could help you broadcast your offering to a wider audience. Check out this episode of the Tennessee Farm Table (theme song guaranteed to get stuck in your head), in which podcaster Amy Campbell gives a running list of Appalachian businesses providing local food to residents. Whether you simply get mentioned or take the next step of being interviewed by a podcaster, this medium is one to embrace. And, if your area has no local podcast, think about launching one to create a more connected community.

Being the helpers

Fred Rogers Memorial Statue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Image Credit: Wally Gobetz.

I hope you've seen something in this article that could help support your local brand's goals to sustain itself in the

coming months. A commonality across all the examples I've reviewed of COVID-19 business adjustments is that regular, open communication with customers to understand and meet their needs is simply essential right now. Your customers' stated requests are your best playbook for this unscripted moment.

It's my heartfelt wish that you'll see the fruits of today's extraordinary efforts in tomorrow's customer loyalty. My teammate, Dr. Pete, recently shared an article with me in which the author described how Marks & Spencer's provision of clothing during Great Britain's World War II textile rationing earned decades of devoted patronage because customers felt the retailer had "been there" for them when it mattered.

Being there at the present may mean transitioning some operations online, onto street curbs and parking lots, or into delivery vans, and how you communicate availability matters more than ever before. I'm inspired by seeing the ingenuity and kindness of the "helpers" Fred Rogers spoke of, in community after community.

There's no denying that this is a challenging time for local search marketing, and yet, at the same time, local promotional skills have never been more critical. Take a second to imagine our communities if we were still limited to once-a-year phone book updates of business information, and I think you'll quickly see just how vital a resource the local Internet has become.

Can you be a helper today? Please, comment about your own business, your clients' brands, or any company in your town that you're seeing make a special endeavor to serve communities. Your story could spark a new idea for a local business owner to keep a neighborhood or even an entire city afloat. Thanks for being a helper.

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