The Post-Pandemic Playbook for Small Businesses



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After over year of pandemic living, recent statistics suggest we're inching closer to a new normal. Vaccine doses are on the rise, travel is picking up and states are starting to reopen. Heck, even the Olympics are back.

Optimism is the current trend in the business world too. Hiring and consumer spending are up, and there's a nice buoyancy among the small businesses I see. Data backs this up; according to SMB Group's 2021 SMB Technology Directions for a Changing World Survey, 65 percent of SMB respondents (businesses with one to 250 employees) are *very* or *somewhat* optimistic about the future of their businesses.

With that renewed hope comes the shoring of the ship: Companies of every size have spent months rethinking their operations to optimize for flexibility. And while every small business is unique, there are a few common strategies they can count on in our post-pandemic world.

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Prioritize people through work-life balance

A silver lining this year has been the acknowledgment that companies must provide a more sustainable work-life balance. The fact that leaders are opening up about this need is a seismic shift and welcome change.

Many companies will not return to work as usual – schedules will be different, video meetings are here to stay and priorities have shifted. Just as companies have worked hard to build personalized experiences for their customers, they're using that methodology to create tailored experiences for their employees. Instead of using perks like snacks and ping-pong tables to keep workers at the office, small businesses are offering greater flexibility and benefits for a better work-life balance.

Review your investment in technology

Aside from Covid, the past year has brought hurricanes, tornados, floods, wildfires, murder hornets and more. What's next? Who knows, but your small business has to be ready for anything, and implementing the right technology to ensure continuity is the first step.

If you think back to the beginning of the pandemic, businesses

without the right technology in place struggled to stay afloat while the businesses with digital tools and services in place were able to pivot and continue to run. Leaders are already preparing for this future, and it's important you do so as well. According to SMB Group, 54 percent of small and midsize businesses have made changes to their technology strategies, and 44 percent plan to increase tech spending this year.

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Empathy is not a *sometimes* thing

Empathy has been critical this year, but let's not forget it once we're past the pandemic. You never know what someone's dealing with outside of work, like breakups, family stress and health challenges. Your colleagues want to feel seen and heard, even when they're not staring down disaster.

You've gotten this far by coming up with unique ways to stay connected and build relationships virtually; be sure to continue those efforts and create a culture of empathy. That means you've got to engage meaningfully, schedule regular check-ins with your team and make the effort to build real relationships. As Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff says, today's leaders must hear "the voices of their employees — they are key stakeholders in a company's success."

Take the time to scenario plan

Another way to stay prepared for what the world throws at us is to scenario plan — come up with various options to change your operations in the face of various situations. Research from my team shows that 30 percent of SMBs have already started to do this in light of the pandemic.

What happens if your sales leader quits at a pivotal time? Which extras can you cut if the market takes a dive? What's your succession plan for your executive team? Come up with an answer for every possible situation, no matter how far-fetched it seems. Perhaps you'll never need those plans, but even just thinking through these scenarios puts you in a nimble mindset. It's a worthwhile exercise to go through with your team.

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The digital-first movement is here to stay

Since we've become accustomed to working online, we'll be hard pressed to return to anything in person – like shopping, office work and events. Is your business set up for virtual?

As you think about this year, be sure your strategy includes a plan to address the digital need. According to the SMB Group, the top areas small businesses are looking to automate are customer service, sales, and financials and accounting. Our own research shows that growing SMBs are much more likely than stagnant SMBs to have adopted technology to prepare for future crises, digitizing things like customer interactions, comms and workflows.

Customer-obsessed businesses will win

One thing that hasn't changed? To succeed in any field, your small business must obsess over customer satisfaction. To get there, make sure you put the customer at the forefront of every decision. Have the right technology in place and use data to strengthen customer relationships.

Even the smallest of businesses can reap the rewards of technology to help manage and track customer relationships. It’s part of being customer-obsessed – and what helps you grow and succeed in a post-Covid world.

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