

How COVID-19 Impacted the Local Catering Industry

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HTMT 210-06

04.04.21

Introduction

Louis Campbell is the owner of Garnish Catering, an organization located in Richmond, Virginia. Campbell founded Garnish in 2014 and has been able to maintain the same staff since then. This is remarkable due to the turnover rate in the hospitality industry. Campbell was not always planning on going into catering; he completed his undergraduate work at Virginia Tech, graduate work at College of Charleston, and then completed the culinary program at Reynolds Community College. Louis is married to my cousin Jill therefore, when I went home for Easter I was able to meet with him at his office. We talked for about two hours about how COVID-19 has impacted the catering industry, how his business was affected by the shutdowns, and where he plans to go moving forward.

Impacts

On March 12th, 2020 Virginia went into lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Many businesses went into panic mode but not Garnish. Louis says he had been watching the spread of the virus as early as December 2019. He mentioned that his co-workers and other people within the industry thought he was crazy for thinking that the virus could impact them. But as we know now, Louis was not the crazy one at this time. Campbell claims he started drafting ideas on how to turn his catering business into a delivery company. He did not know how long he would have to deliver for but he knew he needed the materials to do so. By February 2020, Louis had a full system in place for delivering meals, from the materials, set menus, and transportation, he was preparing for the worst.

When the shutdown happened Louis said, "I facetimed my team- since we did not understand Zoom yet- and explained to them that we were going to make it. I just kept repeating that phrase. They believed in me just as much as I believed in them which is why we have

survived this period.” He showed them everything he had been working on for the past couple of months and with a few adjustments, they were preparing their first meal to deliver: Passover dinner. Campbell says he must have delivered at least 80 full Passover meals all over the greater Richmond area. Word spread about Passover and then it was onto preparing Easter brunches and dinners. Campbell laughed at reflecting on this time because, “It got to the point where we were looking at any sort of holiday to prep meals for, which was weird because we had never done anything like this before.” In between holidays however, Garnish had up to 16 menus for four different regions of cuisine all ready to be delivered to your door.

As the lockdown continued he admits to have become more nervous due to the amount of money he was losing. Sure the delivered meals helped but the lockdown happened during his busiest time of the year. March and April are typically Gala seasons which then transform into the wedding season by May and June. Campbell says it got to the point where he was having to save money in places he did not realize he would have to. For example, he had to consolidate food into three of his six refrigerators because he needed to turn them off to save money on the electricity bill. However, with this in mind, he explains that going into the shutdowns Garnish was strong financially so he did not feel the need to let any of his employees go. Louis explained that, “Garnish is just a big dysfunctional family. I’ve had the same staff with me since I created Garnish so the option to get rid of them because of some unforeseen circumstances was not an option.”

Strategic Responses

By August 2020, Virginia had started opening things back up including small events. In order for Garnish to cater those events major adjustments were needed in order to protect the attendees and the staff. One thing Garnish did was they started buying a ton of plexiglass. This

was used to create sneeze guards in front of the buffet with only a small opening at the bottom to grab the pre-plated food. Louis also bought monogrammed facemasks for his staff with the Garnish logo on it to wear to these events. When working these events many of the attendees struggled with the facemask requirement and even would reach around the plexiglass to grab their food. The staff started to complain to Louis about this and some of them told him they did not feel comfortable working the events anymore. This caused Louis to have a moral dilemma. He explained that, “I just started questioning catering and if the industry was ever going to survive this mess... I started thinking, ‘Am I the problem’ and ‘Should I even be doing this’ which can really take a toll on your mental health.” To move forward from this point was nothing short of an uphill battle.

The first step Campbell took was adding in new cleaning regiments. He explained that being a catering company they always took sanitary precautions so he did not think he would have to up this. However, when his staff showed that they were uncomfortable, Louis bought in bulk disinfectant sprayers, faceguards, and a couple of UV sanitizing lights. He put it as, “I mean I rather be out a couple hundred bucks then lose a whole team which could destroy my company.”

The next step Louis took to adjusting to COVID-19 was creating more of an online presence. Garnish already had a strong website however, in order for people to know about delivery options, they took to Facebook. On Facebook, they posted their set menus for the week which allowed for people to message them to sign up for a delivery time. People were able to share Garnish’s post which also helped spread the word quickly. I asked him if he saw a big impact by having more of a social media presence and he said, “At first no, people were just reposting us but we didn’t see any big changes in sales. But then in May- specifically Cinco de

Mayo- all of a sudden our sales were up for the first time since Easter... So many people were sharing our menu on Facebook so I can only assume that is why.”

Future

Today, Louis is catering weddings and events with his full staff. They have all been vaccinated and are comfortable going to these events even if people are not masked properly. Louis showed me that they are still taking all safety precautions including limited people in the kitchen, disinfecting every utensil, pot, and pan used, and always wearing a mask no matter what.

Financially Louis explains, “Well considering what we went through and continue to battle I’d say we’re in a good position. But, if this were the ‘normal’ world, I’d say we are in a tough spot. I’m not losing money any more but I’m not where I should be in April.” He explained to me that Virginia regulations have been nothing but challenging and he has seen other catering companies fail for not adapting to the circumstances, but by adding delivery meals has allowed for him to stay afloat.

Moving forward, Louis plans to keep delivering meals for holidays but has stopped his weekly menu options. Instead, he offers lunches to be delivered to offices, dinner delivery for private events, and fully staffed catered meals for any event. Restrictions in Virginia are lifting slowly so it is giving him a little more freedom as to what he can and can not do. This summer he has weddings and other events already lined up so he is hopeful things can only get better. I asked Louis what he has learned from all of this and he said, “I’ve learned to trust my gut. If I hadn’t been preparing for delivering food before March I would have been screwed to say the least. I also figured out just how important it is to have a good team that trusts you because you

trust them.” Hearing the boss speak like that about his team is inspiring and I can only hope that the environment I work in functions like this as well.

Critical Analysis

Overall, Louis handled the situation as best he could. My biggest compliment to him would be the fact that he was able to plan early and prepare for meal deliveries. Even though people around him thought he was crazy, Louis listened to his gut and prepared for the worst. A characteristic that stood out to me was that he showed what it meant to be a leader. Louis was able to lead his team and allow them to trust him even when things got difficult and nothing was certain, his team was able to rely on him and he was able to rely on his team. Not only was his team able to rely on him but his customers as well. Louis explained that though weddings were cancelled for the majority of 2020, because he handled it so well and was not “money hungry” with their deposits, the families have continued to keep him as their caterer until they are ready to reschedule. Though I think Louis could be more organized with scheduling and rescheduling, the fact he is able to hold them as clients is great news for his company today and in the future.

COVID-19 has caused organizations of all kinds to change their ways both internally and externally and it has weeded out the strong versus the weak. In the article “What has changed? The Impact of Covid Pandemic on the Technology and Innovation Management Research Agenda” written by Gerard George, Karim R. Lakhani, and Phanish Puranam; they explain that, “Collaboration and communication drive innovation behaviour.” Without collaboration during this pandemic, nothing would have been possible. Even when people are working from home (as discussed in the article), people have been able to communicate and collaborate even more so than before. Within catering, if Louis’s team had not communicated to him that they were

uncomfortable working events where they are put at risk, there would have been no changes made.

Louis Campbell is well aware of how he made the impossible possible. In fact, he recently received a letter from the Virginia governor commending him for a job well done on staying afloat in a safe and effective way during this global pandemic. Unfortunately, other organizations within the hospitality industry were not as successful. According to the article, “The role of the business model in the hospitality industry during the Covid-19 crisis” written by Matthias Breier, Andreas Kallmuenzer, Thomas Clauss, Johanna Gast, Sascha Kraus, and Victor Tiberius, explains that, “...innovations are defined as ‘everything that differs from business as usual or which represents a discontinuance of previous practice in some sense for the innovating firm’ (Hjalager, 2010, p. 2), and occur in the form of product/service, process, managerial, marketing, or institutional innovations.” At a time of uncertainty, companies were watched by consumers to see who would adjust to make them feel more comfortable while buying their goods- Garnish did just that. Some companies did the bare minimum whereas others would go above and beyond, those are the companies that became successful.

References

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- Breier, M., Kallmuenzer, A., Clauss, T., Gast, J., Kraus S., and Tiberius, V. (2021). *International Journal of Hospitality Management*.