



## Local businesses aim for a better normal

By Phil Hall

September 6, 2020

To put it charitably, this has been a disastrous year for most businesses. According to the Yelp Economic Average report for the second quarter, permanent closures accounted for 55% of all businesses that shuttered since March 1.

However, many businesses managed to weather the turmoil brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic and are already moving ahead to a better normal.

### **UNPERTURBED BY COVID**

Of course, not all industries were equally impacted by the pandemic. Bruce Wettenstein, partner at Westport-based Vidal/Wettenstein LLC, observed that the industrial sector within the commercial real estate industry did not absorb the havoc that impacted other sectors.

“Fortunately, my specialty has been industrial,” Wettenstein said. “I do warehousing, factories and distribution, and this year we continue to be very active.”

Since April, Vidal/Wettenstein worked on five major transactions in Fairfield and New Haven Counties: Bringing Tapestry Tele Health Care Locates to Norwalk’s Merritt 8 Corporate Park; expanding Nuovo Pasta Productions into a Stratford warehouse facility; locating Fairfield’s Bigelow Tea into a warehouse in Orange; relocating Norwalk’s O’Reilly Electric to a new headquarters in Stratford; and moving that site’s previous occupant, North County Boatworks, to a facility in Milford.

Vidal/Wettenstein’s business “just slowed down to maybe 10% of the normal flow of activity” at the peak of the pandemic, Wettenstein said, but is now “probably 90% to 95%” back to normal.

“As far as the business aspect, the industrial sector has not slowed down – it’s still going very strong,” he added.

Wettenstein observed the shoreline region's manufacturing space remained strong during the pandemic and available industry properties don't stay on the market for prolonged periods. He is now representing a property that just became vacant, adding that "we already have an offer to lease from a substantial company."

On the residential real estate of the market, Craig Oshrin, a realtor in the Fairfield office of Coldwell Banker, saw little disruption in his business, adding that he has been working with a "consistent flow of motivated buyers who are super focused." Oshrin is also benefiting from being in the right place at the right time.

"Five of the six buyers I am working with are coming from New York City," he said, pointing to the exodus of New Yorkers who are abandoning a Big Apple pockmarked by the pandemic's financial tumult and an abrupt spike in violent crime. "I'll be very curious to see if Connecticut will have another wave like the 10,000 change of addresses that we saw in March through May."

The skein of New Yorkers seeking Oshrin's input has created a circle of referrals that keeps him busy.

"I am being rewarded by my performance and track record," he added.

Digitally-focused companies also had fewer problems pivoting during the pandemic. Jaime Urteaga, founder and CEO at Digital Chair Inc. in White Plains, initially approached the pandemic with apprehension.

"At first it was weird," he recalled. "We feared we'd lose some of our business."

But Digital Chair was already conducting about 60% of its meetings in a virtual setting prior to the pandemic, and Urteaga's expertise in online conferencing helped to keep client inquiries flowing.

"We picked up a lot of new business and added more work from existing clients," he said. "We also created new web apps for our clients."

As a result of this bump in activity, Urteaga said he was able to bring several new workers on board.

## **A PAUSE FOR PLANNING**

While many businesses were forced to close their doors as part of state-mandated stay-at-home orders, some professionals used this down time to plan for bigger happenings.

For Mariusz Janicki, owner of MJ Fitness & Kickboxing in Danbury, the temporary closure of his business was not a cue to put everything on hold.

"I kept in touch with my clients all the time," he said. "Now, people are really eager to come back and walk up to the gym."

In the first month since his June reopening, Janicki found himself facing a new slate of inquiries from people eager to move beyond the physical and emotional anxiety of the pandemic's quarantine.

"A lot of people now think about going to the gym to relieve stress and get back to shape," he continued. "In my first month of the reopening, I have a lot of new clients. And I think people see that we are doing a lot to keep the gym very clean and very safe."

Janicki also used the pandemic period to finalize plans to move his business to a larger location in Danbury, upgrading from a 2,600-square-foot facility to a 5,000-square-foot environment that can be divided with 1,000 square feet for personal training and 3,000 square feet for classes of up to 20 people.

"I'm growing in the right direction," he stated.

Also using the pandemic period to reinforce and grow his business was Scott Johnson, CEO at Mack Media Group in Brookfield. Johnson also kept in touch with his clients during the quarantine period to ensure their marketing efforts would not evaporate.

"We were able to let them know about how important it is to leverage this time," he explained. "Because if people are going to stop their marketing, what happens when the economy fires back up again? You want to make sure that you have all your positions in Google and that you don't lose any of your rankings. We explained that to a lot of our clients, who understand it's an investment so they can now get some of that money back that was lost."

As the pandemic was taking root, Johnson's agency scored a major hit by signing former heavyweight boxing champion Evander Holyfield as a client – and the timing of this transaction actually worked in Johnson's favor.

"It was cool because he was locked down," Johnson recalled. "So, we had an opportunity to have conversations with him that we probably normally wouldn't have been able to have if Covid wasn't going on. We were able to grow his social media exponentially within that time period, doing all of his website design and development, his social media, a lot of his video content, his YouTube strategy and all of his foundation work, as well."

## **WHEN LIFE HANDS YOU LEMONS ...**

Some companies found themselves uniquely challenged by the pandemic, but managed to shift direction into new and unexpected opportunities.

One of the more unusual responses to the pandemic's upheaval involved Bauer Office Solutions, a provider of Canon copiers and printers to the tri-state region's office market. Company president Bob Forstbauer shut down the Manhattan headquarters and the Elmsford satellite office in March, reopening the latter one month later with a skeleton crew.

“Thank God we had IP phones, because when we closed the office in Manhattan, everybody took their phones home with them and plugged them into their routers in their house,” he recalled. “And it was seamless for from my business. So, when somebody called in to the city or Elmsford for service, we were able to continue on and make it look like we were still there when everybody really was working from home.”

Still, the closure of offices around the region was disastrous for Forstbauer’s operations.

“I went from maybe \$250,000 a month in service billing between the two locations down to right around \$30,000,” he lamented. “I have a huge overhead with roughly 20 people that work for me, and I don’t want to let anybody off. The Payroll Protection Program gave me some breathing room.”

Redemption for Forstbauer’s business came via a friend who ran a business creating protective equipment for doctors. While his friend’s business shifted to manufacturing personal protective equipment for the full range of frontline workers, Forstbauer was inspired to switch focus to sell and install protective reception guards.

“I thought that would be a great idea because everybody was going to need it,” he said. “We started marketing these reception guards and the business took a 180-degree turn. We went from selling and servicing copier machines point to selling and installing reception guards at AFC Urgent Cares, medical offices and for lawyers and doctors.”

Forstbauer yet to reopen his Manhattan office and is considering whether the virtual office set-up would be more cost-effective when the pandemic is over. And while he is grateful that this new business line is keeping his workforce gainfully employed, he nonetheless admitted that he would “rather have my old business back” and is happy when his original focus produces occasional revenue.

“Believe it or not, there have been a few people who have ordered office machines during this time,” he said.

In Norwalk, the LGBTQ bar and performance space Troupe429 cannot resume its original focus because it falls into a category that still awaiting approval by Gov. Ned Lamont to reopen.

“I believe we were the first bar to close by our choice before being mandated by the governor,” said co-owner Casey Fitzpatrick.

After four months with locked doors, Troupe429 business reinvented itself as a pop-up record store. Fitzpatrick credited Norwalk-based record collector Joe Masher with gathering the selection of vinyl albums for sale.

“He has curated each record to ensure it has quality playback,” Fitzpatrick said.

Fitzpatrick transformed the club's disco ball-crowned dance floor into a music retail setting, adding that the selection covers "vintage 50s and 60s classics to brand new releases." Since offering the record retail option, Fitzpatrick reported the sale of hundreds of records.

"The response from new and old customers has been amazing," he said.

Although Troupe429 cannot operate as a bar at this time, it can run a craft cocktail lounge on its outdoor patio that features snacks and signature cocktails including the "Glamazon" – a combination of pineapple and passion fruit vodka, mango juice, and grenadine swirl. However, Fitzpatrick is eager to get the green light from the governor to restore the original environment.

"There are less than 700 queer bars left in America," he said. "They have been closing at an alarming rate for the past decade, and being hit with Covid-19 and a prolonged quarantine has increased the odds of more LGBTQ bars closing before the end of the year. We really must come together as a community to save our safe spaces right now."

## **WORKS IN PROGRESS**

Other businesses are striving for a better — albeit a somewhat slower paced — recovery.

When the pandemic forced Jason Ayala to close his one-man It Is Wellness Massage Therapy practice, he was able to secure supplemental income with a paid internship at Congregants for a New Connecticut, a social justice nonprofit. With the reopening of his business in July came new sanitizing procedures that altered his schedule and cash flow.

"It takes a lot more extra time to disinfect and sanitize between sessions," he said. "I have to schedule at least an hour in between clients. With the extra time taken up by cleaning, I could definitely be making a lot more."

Ayala remained in touch with his clients during the closure of his practice. While some have been eager to get back, he admitted some could not return due to financial hardships and health concerns.

"I'm still getting cancellations because they were exposed to Covid-19 and have to self-quarantine," he said.

Ayala remains optimistic of building his business back. His studio is located inside Gravity Bodywork in Bridgeport's Black Rock community, and that business is hosting a "Patio Friday" function that provides sampling of free services, including Ayala's massage therapy work, and results are starting to percolate.

"I have a couple of new clients," he said. "Slowly but surely, things are coming back."

Also hard hit during this time were independent restaurants. Family-owned Trattoria 632 in Purchase already operated takeout and delivery options for years, thus enabling it keep functioning until in-person dining options could be restored.

Still, there is one revenue stream for Trattoria 632 that has been slow to be replenished: its lucrative catering business serving the corporate parks and schools in Westchester and across the border in Greenwich.

“It comes as people start going back to work and going back to the offices,” said Anthony J. Mangone, general manager. “We’re starting to see catering starting to increase, so we’ve been we’ve been fortunate in that respect.”

Mangone acknowledged that his restaurant has lost opportunities that it cannot easily replace.

“We missed out on three of the best months in the restaurant industry: April, May and June,” he continued. “We missed out on all of the communions and other sacraments where people have parties afterwards. We missed out on college graduation for both SUNY Purchase and Manhattanville College and, of course, the high school graduations. Most of the high school graduations in years past have been hosted at SUNY Purchase, and we would get the benefit of the, people leaving SUNY Purchase and coming to us afterwards for different events. So, it’s been it’s been difficult, to say the least.”

Nonetheless, Mangone is waiting for his turn to shine again.

“Until everybody’s back into their normal flow, we’re going to suffer a little bit,” he said. “But I