

What The Pandemic Should Teach Us

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In a lifetime of life changing events, the COVID-19 pandemic stands alone. It has blown across the planet largely unabated and has shown us that we are the masters of our destiny. Until nature decides otherwise. Most business and industry are either shut down entirely, or severely curtailed. In the United States where 68% of the economy is consumer spending, and consumers are largely out of the market due to lay-offs and shelter in place orders, it is hard to imagine it all ever getting back to normal. Whatever “normal” will be after this.

For ALTI and our membership, it feels like the industry is in limbo. ISE in Amsterdam in February was a smaller event than past years. Then came the cascade of trade show cancellations and postponements. Pro-Light and Sound. Cancelled. InfoComm. Cancelled. ALTI-EXPO. Cancelled. Many more key trade events cancelled. Whatever one’s feelings about trade shows, they are a vital link for innovators, manufacturers, and consumers. They are also a fairly accurate reflection of the markets. Travel restrictions and corporate cutbacks have put 2020 event planning in question. For now. Although it may feel like the industry is in limbo, nothing would be further from the truth. There is a full slate of new products, technologies, and innovations ready to go. Right now. Many were set to drop at one or more of the aforementioned trade shows. Smart suppliers are now holding back some of those introductions pending an improving marketplace. It is encouraging to see the increased activity in social networking and outreach to offer encouragement and the promise of better times to come.

The industry today is about staying top of mind with clients. It goes beyond being empathetic or running ads professing concern and “we’re all in this together”. It is about concerned suppliers asking; “How can I help?”. It isn’t about platitudes or PR. It is about reinforcing a genuine and consistent concern for customers. Companies that have always practiced this may have a tough time for a while, but they will tend to be “go to” resources when business resumes.

What will the audio and loudspeaker industry look like post COVID-19? While most would like to hope that everyone goes back to work and business picks up where it left off, it is highly unlikely that it will go that way. First, most health experts believe that the US and the rest of the world will go back to work in stages as health conditions improve regionally or in pockets. The big variable is the very real possibility of flair ups where restrictions are lifted too soon. The CDC also feels it likely that we will be dealing with this for at least 12 to 18 months. Business must plan to ramp up, but must also proceed with caution. This is one circumstance where being reactive to market conditions may be smarter (and safer!) than trying to predict them. Second, everyone will be cash strapped and many will be teetering at the brink by the time we get back to work. Smart suppliers will be creative and innovative in working with clients to get back up to speed. Third, learn the lessons that a global pandemic can teach. This is not a once in a lifetime event. WHO and CDC and others are saying that outbreaks like this could easily become more frequent. Let’s hope that they are wrong. Let’s plan in case they are right.

What might such planning look like?

- Begin to accumulate an accessible source of cash to cover extended periods of reduced revenue and maintain it. Easier said than done. Look at your budget as more than a growth tool. Look at it as a survival tool.
- Examine inventory control and “just in time” supply chains. There must be a balance between enhancing return on investment and limiting one’s vulnerability to market upheaval.
- Improve your social media and marketing efforts. Even those who are proficient can improve. Social media is about product and service awareness, news, company updates, and reinforcing relationship building. Hint: It isn’t more frequency. It is about posts with quality content that resonates with your audience. If there is not a dedicated person coordinating social media; Get one, or take the time to become proficient.
- Improve one on one connections. People have relationships with people. Not companies. We are loyal to people. Not companies. There are those that believe that personal loyalties are passé. That is simply not true. In trying times, personal relationships can be the difference between survival and failure.
- Trade shows are a must. To see and be seen is vital. It is also the starting point for those one on one relationships and an ideal place to reinforce them. Few people write big orders at trade shows anymore, but comparing products and companies, side by side is irreplaceable. Money spent by businesses fall into 2 categories; Expense and investment. A trade show should be an investment. If it isn’t, you’re doing it wrong.
- Always be building a network of people one may call upon when needed. Whether it is an employee, a service provider, a leader, or a resource not planned upon; Having a wide and varied network of contacts available will make rapid adaptation in times of change easier and less painful.

This pandemic will end, or at least abate. The question is what lessons will we learn, and *will we remember them?* Business will be good again. Be planning for the recovery now. Be nimble enough to make rapid adjustments as needed. And always plan for the inevitable bump in the road.