

Covid-19 and your small business

We need fast action to make thousands of small businesses throughout South Africa more resilient to coronavirus-related economic disruptions. Small businesses are vital economic engines, the mainstay of our economy and the future of job creation. More than two-thirds of the working force work in a small business today.



Source: www.nsbcafrica

This is why we need to make sure we bridge businesses through these tough times. Our goal is to make sure businesses stay in business and that we keep workers employed. Although this is a time to be careful it's not a time to panic and stop shopping locally, it's the time to stand together.

“ During this national crisis, our sole purpose is to support you and your business, especially during unpredictable times like this. The main thing to remember is, you are not alone, we're here to help guide you. If there is one thing we know about business owners and entrepreneurs within the SME sector, it is that we are enormously resilient. We will without a doubt come through this much stronger.” - Mike Anderson, founder and CEO of National Small Business Chamber (NSBC) ”

The NSBC is working closely with the financial institutions and all key funders to provide this vital economic support by targeted, low-interest disaster recovery loans to small businesses and zero-interest loans to businesses with less than 50 employees who are severely impacted by the situation, to help overcome the temporary loss of revenue they may experience and to help them withstand the economic impact of the coronavirus.

Working from home, self-quarantine, cancelled sporting events, social distancing may help mitigate the coronavirus but it also threatens to devastate small businesses.

How to stay connected with customers through the coronavirus outbreak

Your customers may be on self-quarantine, but that doesn't mean you can't stay connected and continue providing excellent service.

Schools have closed and offices are urging employees to work from home, and small businesses that rely on foot traffic are seeing their in-store sales take a hit.

If you've noticed a drop in customers, you're not alone. In our digital world, there are plenty of ways to stay connected to your customers through this pandemic and keep your business going through it.

Here are a few smart strategies for brick-and-mortar businesses looking to keep their audience engaged and in the loop, even if they're self-quarantined or avoiding public places.

Communicate transparently with your customers

Everyone is facing this together, so be open about what your business is going through. Customers can empathise with what you are facing as long as you communicate with them properly.

Consider implementing a delivery option if you don't already have one and if you know customers are avoiding public spaces. Inform them of the steps you're taking to mitigate risk and even show them the steps you're taking to help the community. If you have to greet your customers face-to-face consider a fist-bump, foot-tap or elbow-knock before you shake hands. You may be strong but there are people who may have compromised immune systems and we should be sensitive to it.

When communicating about the Covid-19 virus make sure you get your facts from a reliable source. You don't want to be adding to the panic. Ensure that you check the facts and do not just forward any emails as there could be a lot of scams doing the rounds.

Let customers know what you're doing to prevent the spread of Covid-19

Send an email to your customers and post signage in your store to assure them that you're doing everything you can to protect their health when they visit your store.

Share any increased cleaning, disinfecting and hygiene protocols you're following, and let them know that you are enforcing self-quarantine among any employees who might be experiencing symptoms. If you are altering your hours or closing your store for a deep-clean, you should let your customers know that, too.

In addition, you may offer your clients and staff hand sanitiser or disinfectant soap so that they can clean their hands as often as possible.

Increase your social media presence

Your customers are already on social media, but these days, they are likely checking in much more frequently to get the latest updates on the virus. Whether you're posting about the virus specifically or trying to offer light, positive content to help take people's minds off the panic, it can be helpful to increase your posting frequency to ensure you are showing up in their news feeds.

Offer online deals

If your business already has an e-commerce component, remind customers that they can still shop for their favourite items on your website. It might even help to offer a coupon or discount to encourage online shopping while your customers are staying home anyway.

If you operate a service-based business like a restaurant or a salon, you may want to consider offering online sales of gift certificates. Encourage your customers to buy a certificate now, so they can treat themselves and redeem it when the virus outbreak has slowed and their self-quarantine period is over. This can help maintain sales for you while giving your customers something fun and exciting to look forward to.

Use sanitising products and make sure people know where to wash their hands

For those customers who do come into your store, it's important to enforce good hygiene practices and encourage everyone who passes through your doors (customers and employees alike) follow the practice extreme cleanliness.

Rein in your spending

Try not to spend money on items which are not critical for the operation of your business. It is time to cut down on the nice-to-haves and rather focus on the bare essentials to make your business run as efficiently as possible. You should also focus on all the people who owe you money and try to collect that money into your bank.

Focus on assisting your customers through digital channels

You may already offer phone and email support to your customers, but now is the time to increase your customer service capabilities and ensure your customers can reach you, no matter where they are.

Social media is a good place to start, as you can offer the option to chat via Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and other instant messaging platforms. You can also offer video conferencing options through Zoho, Skype or FaceTime, so your customers can get that "face-to-face" feel without actually being there person.

A few more tips to endure Covid-19:

- **Strategise with your team and create a contingency plan**

Now is the time to look critically at your business and make a business continuity plan. If there's one thing small business owners and entrepreneurs share it is being resilient and resourceful in times of adversity.

Negotiate and stay in contact with suppliers, think about how you can adjust your offering and look at how you could weather the financial implications ahead. We are all aware of the saying, two minds are better than one, so involve your team in a powerful brainstorming and strategy session today and put your plan in place.

- **Think outside your box**

Now is the time to think of innovative ways to get your product or service into the hands of your clients. You may need to change how you deliver your product or service. Or you may have to look at how your organisation is structured. But it is critical to make a move to do things differently today.

- **Communicate with your staff and add more flexibility**

- Review your human resource policies.
- Advise those who are showing the symptoms to stay home.
- Consider flexible work options e.g. working remotely and more flexible schedules. Create a remote working policy, including hours and means of communication.
- Keep your employees informed on accurate information about the virus. Help to quell rumours and fake news and promote calm. Ensure them that they are a top priority.
- Decide how you will handle absenteeism and think about how you will communicate if people get sick. Try to be as understanding as possible when something comes up (e.g. parents and childcare with the schools that are closed) and have a contingency plan in case you suddenly become short-staffed.

Finally, remember to breathe. This is a tense time for many businesses but we need to show kindness and generosity to one another and remember to enjoy what you do and share the fun with those who interact with your business.

Your contribution, suggestions, tips and advice to build on the campaign of helping small businesses throughout the nation get through this crisis will be appreciated. Please e-mail covid19@nsbc.africa

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