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Creating opportunities for people to live, work, and thrive on the Lower Cape

Pivoting your business: Tapping into the entrepreneurial spirit to overcome the coronavirus

“We are trying to be enterprising, and the whole thing has opened up my eyes to what can be done.”

Zack Dixon

Co-Owner and General Manager, Holbrook Oysters

As the Lower and Outer Cape heads into summer, typically the busiest time of year, businesses are far from going back to the way they were. Health and safety regulations, implemented to protect the public from the coronavirus, have fundamentally changed the way Cape businesses operate. Over the past couple of months, we have seen not only the resilience, but the creativity of our small business community.

Business we have spoken with have responded in varying ways – for all it has meant a dramatic shift in their business model. Major changes in business strategy that usually take a year or two to plan, have occurred within weeks. We recently spoke with two local entrepreneurs who have significantly shifted their business models.

Zack Dixon is a Wellfleet native who began shell fishing in 2012. Zack is the General Manager and co-owner along with Jake and Justin Dalby of Holbrook Oysters. Their oysters and clams are farmed on a two-acre aquaculture grant in Wellfleet harbor.

At times, oyster farming can be a risky business. Like many farms, Holbrook didn't sell directly to consumers or restaurants, but instead to a wholesaler who distributed their product. “Shellfish is always completely supply side driven,” explains Zack, “every fall the prices go down because everyone has a lot of supply.” Two years ago, Holbrook Oysters made a significant change in their business strategy to avoid competition with other growers. They began harvesting a majority of their crop in early spring to avoid seasonal competition and in 2019, cut out the middle man to become their



Zack (left) and team members Jacob and Justin out on the farm.

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own distributor. When the coronavirus hit in March, the business stopped in its tracks. Having a distributor license, however, provided a path forward.

Seemingly overnight as restaurants across the state and the country closed, the farm's income was reduced to zero while their infrastructure costs remained. To keep their business afloat, they had to make a significant shift in their business strategy and started selling online directly to consumers. "The logistics were crazy," recalls Zack, "We were making deliveries twice a week to 60 to 70 individuals who were contacting us via email or text." They have since moved to an online ordering system, but many challenges remain.

"In a normal year we have 30 regular clients," says Zack. At the time of writing this article, only three have returned. When things start to return to "normal" there is an appetite for maintaining some aspects of the current system. "We are trying to be enterprising, and the whole thing has opened up my eyes to what can be done."

Catering is another industry that has been deeply affected by the pandemic. With large gatherings restricted for the foreseeable future, caterers have had to think creatively to keep their businesses viable. Laura Davis is the owner of Cosmos Catering, which has operated in Provincetown for 18 years.

One of the biggest challenges for Laura and her team is finding a safe way to cater to clients who are going forward with their mid-sized gatherings later in the season. Making things more difficult is that the Commonwealth's reopening plan lacks direction for caterers. "There was guidance for restaurants and for event venues, but nothing for the caterers," says Laura.



Owner Laura Davis with Cosmos' delivery trucks.

Luckily for Cosmos, most of the large events booked for this summer chose to postpone to 2021 rather than cancel, including the CDP's annual Summer Evening on the Farm. Many events have also downsized significantly and have decided to use Cosmos' drop-off service. "We are pretty booked for next summer, we just need to work on getting through this year," Laura says. She also notes that they were able to secure a Paycheck Protection Plan loan to keep their team employed while they shifted their business strategy.

Despite restrictions on large gatherings, Cosmos is still getting calls for full service catering at backyard parties for the fall. This has caused a dilemma for Laura and her staff. "It's really about figuring out how to cater these mid-sized events, while keeping our staff and the guests safe," says Laura, "It really looks like it will come down to us to enforce our own guidelines."

With event catering on the backburner, Cosmos established two new divisions. The first is *Cosmos to Go*, a takeout sandwich shop serving out of their catering office on Race Point Road. For Laura, this is an idea that she had been considering before the virus outbreak. "Last year the former owner of Sam's Deli in Eastham joined our team and we talked about starting a lunch spot on the side of catering,"



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recalls Laura. She hopes to keep serving lunches even as things return to normal, “it just won’t be out of our catering location.”

The second is *Cosmos Concierge Catering*, a pre-prepared meal delivery service with options for all three meals and weekly specials. “We saw that people were starting to come back to their summer homes and we even had some former clients call us,” says Laura, “They were either quarantining or didn’t want the hassle of going to the grocery store.” Cold meals can be ordered and delivered daily across Provincetown. “We used to have a \$500 minimum for delivery or drop-off, now we get excited when we get an order for two people,” she says.

Despite the challenges facing her business, Laura is optimistic and looking forward to this summer. “We have a great team that has allowed us to successfully make these changes,” says Laura. “We were lucky enough to have some money saved up, so we’re confident we will make it through this year.”

The coronavirus has caused many hardships for the Lower and Outer Cape’s small business community. But it has also revealed the strength and ingenuity of our local business owners to persevere through these challenging times. Holbrook Oysters and Cosmos Catering are just two businesses that have successfully pivoted in the past couple months. We encourage everyone to support our local businesses over the summer and be patient as they work out the best way to keep staff and customers safe!

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