

Social Media, Confusion, and Small Business During the COVID 19 Crisis

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In March 2020, the U.S. economy began a systematic shutdown in response to the COVID 19 pandemic. Schools, churches, retail, and service business all closed as states implemented stay at home orders in the name of public safety. Business fell into either essential or non-essential classifications in response to state and local government mandates. Loosely worded guideline created confusion among small business owners and their customers as to what services were available. This study examines the confused state of small business in response to their classification and the methods used by business owners to communicate their status to customers.

Keywords: small business, social media, COVID 19

INTRODUCTION

The COVID 19 pandemic has devastated the American economy (Stangler, 2020) and its 30.2 million small businesses (Giese, 2020). According to the NFIB Study on the Impact of COVID-19 on Small Business, seventy six percent of small businesses have been negatively impacted by the COVID 19 crisis (NFIB, 23 March, 2020) as of mid-March. This impact increased to 92% by the end of March 2020 (NFIB, 2 April 2020). In early May 2020, over 22 million U.S. jobs had been lost due to the pandemic with most of the losses occurring in small business (Coleman, 2020). Some experts believe that small business losses could exceed one trillion dollars before the crisis ends (Ritholtz, 2020).

In the face of this historic crisis, many small business owners struggled with the confusion over essential verses non-essential business classifications issued by state governments. Small business owners also faced challenges with finding ways to communicate their status to customers throughout the crisis. Many small businesses classified as essential managed to remain open during the crisis. The essential classification increased survival rates for many small business owners (Conerly, 2020). Small businesses, deemed non-

essential, shut down following their state’s shelter in place orders, essentially closing from mid-March to mid-May 2020. As a result, business owners operating non-essential businesses viewed the COVID 19 pandemic as a battle for survival (Twiste, 2020). This study assesses the response of small business owners to the pandemic. It assesses how business in a small Midwestern city coped with the state government’s classification process. This study also assesses the communication techniques used by small business owners to convey their status during the shelter-in place shutdown period as well as techniques used to communicate their reopening status.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to the COVID 19 pandemic, small businesses contribute 44% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) each year (Dore, 2019). Experts predict that once final calculation are completed, small business’ 2019 GDP contributions will exceed \$ 9.3 trillion. Small businesses employ an estimated 58.9 million people or approximately 47.5% of all working Americans (Lauckner, 2020). In a matter of months, small business’ contribution to the GDP and employment security is in peril. By mid-March 2020, the US Chamber of Commerce estimated that one in four or approximately 7.6 million small businesses temporarily closed due to the COVID 19 pandemic. U.S. unemployment due to the pandemic exceeded 22 million workers (Long, 2020) by late April with the final number of displaced workers still unknown at this time.

In response to the pandemic, States issued stay at home orders for residents and ordered non-essential businesses to close. Essential business/organizations were defined as are those needed to “maintain health care, public health operations, human service operations, essential government functions, and essential infrastructure” (Acton, 2020). These broad instructions translated into the following partial list of business services deemed essential for example by the State of Ohio (TABLE 1).

**TABLE 1
SMALL BUSINESS SERVICES DEEMED ESSENTIAL (OHIO EXAMPLE)**

Essential Services
Stores selling Groceries and medicine
Food, beverage, agriculture, and licensed marijuana production
Organizations that provide charitable and social services
Gas stations and businesses needed for transportation
Financial and insurance institutions
Hardware and supply stores
Critical trades
Mail, post, shipping, logistics, delivery, and pick up services
Restaurants for consumption off-premises
Supplies to work from home
Laundry services
Supplies essential to business operations
Transportation services
Home care and services
Professional services
Residential facilities
Manufacture, distribution, and supply of critical products and industries
Hotels and motels
Funeral services

Small businesses not falling into the above categories were classified as non-essential. Non-essential businesses were required to close until their State issued a reopening order. As a result, non-essential small

businesses were hit hardest by the pandemic (Huddleston, 2020). Confusion over these vague classifications prompted small business owners to seek clarification over their status. For example, on just one day in Wisconsin, confusion between essential and non-essential prompted 7,400 calls and online inquiries from small business owners questioning if their business could stay open (Ryan, 2020); a pattern that was repeated across the country (Mack, 2020; Romero, 2020; Sandy 2020). Further, many states left enforcement of the essential/non-essential classification orders to local municipalities resulting in an inconsistent interpretation of the guidelines (Rodriguez, 2020). Compounding the confusion experienced by small businesses was the mixed interpretation of the widely published classifications among customers. Many small businesses owners selling a mixed product line decided to stay open until challenged (Bose & Fares, 2020).

The COVID 19 pandemic also created a communication crisis for small business owners. Individual business owners were left to their own resources in the manner and timing of their status messages. The effectiveness of face-to-face conversations, a reliable staple the small businesses' communication arsenal (McQuerrey, 2020), was neutralized by governmental stay at home orders. Word-of-mouth messaging failed, as consumers chose to stay in their homes due to safety concerns and embraced online shopping platforms as an alternative (Wahba, 2020). Telephone conversations and voicemail remained an effective technique for small business owners to convey their status during the pandemic. Despite the decreased popularity of this communication media, it still provides business owners with a vehicle for immediate and personal communication (Nestor & Thompson, 2019).

Another communication technique available to small business was local radio. Experts view radio messaging as an intimate experience for the listener (Marketingcharts, 2019) with many people listening to the radio in solitude. According to Marketingcharts.com, 71% of people listen to the radio while driving. The appeal of radio advertising to small business owners is a reliance on the habitual nature of customers. Everyone has a favorite radio station they listen to commuting to and from work. Customers usually will program their radios to preset stations accessing them at predetermined times. In addition, many individuals use radio as a way to fill dead spots in their workday. Thus, radio advertising provides small business owners with an effective platform to communicate a message to customers.

Podcasts have emerged as one of the best informational resources for entrepreneurs (Smale, 2010). Podcasts are distributed digital audio files made available to subscribers on the internet for downloading to a computer or mobile device. Similar to radio, podcasts offer small business owners a unique way to connect with customers. Studies show that in 2019, 51% of the U.S. population ages 14 to 54 listen to podcasts (Peiser, 2019). Companies such as Google, Pandora, Spotify and other continue to build their libraries and create unique advertising opportunities for small businesses (Kaufer, 2020) to communicate with customers. An available but lesser used option for small business communication is television. In many cases, television advertising is limited to small businesses located in areas with access to a local TV station. Small business owners in these markets have the option of advertising through broadcast or cable stations. Rates for television advertising vary by the time slot and programming targeted. A thirty-two second commercial can cost from \$200-\$2,000 to create when using a professional production company (LaMarco, 2019). Though available, the cost of a television spot with undetermined viewership may deter this method of communication in times of economic uncertainty.

Signage is another effective way for small businesses to relate messages to customers. Signs can be as simple as a message written on paper and posted in a visible area or as complex as a post on websites, or email. Signs can convey a traditional static message or convey a flexible and personal meaning depending on the media. For the message contained on the sign to reach the customer, however, the customer must be in close proximity to the sign (for example, standing at the front door of the business).

Social media platforms are increasingly the communication method of choice among customers. The more advanced the delivery platform the more sophisticated the message (Rahman, 2017). According to Statista, 27.2 million or 90% of U.S. small business use social media platforms to communicate with customers in 2019 (Guttmann, 2019). With 247 million or 79% of Americans using social media in 2019, digital media platforms provide an effective way for small business to communicate with their customers during times of crisis.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study examines the techniques small business owners used to cope with the essential/non-essential classification imposed by local governments during the COVID 19 pandemic and the communication techniques used to convey business status. The authors posed the following research questions:

1. How did small business owners respond to the essential versus non-essential business classifications imposed by state governments' stay at home orders?
2. What techniques did small business owners employ to communicate their status to customers?

METHODOLOGY

Researchers at a Midwestern university conducted this study from March 6, 2020 to May 31, 2020. In order to answer the above research questions, fifty-five Midwestern small businesses were surveyed to assess their response to the COVID 19 crisis. All businesses surveyed were located in a city with a population less than 20,000. The majority of the businesses involved in the study employed less than 10 individuals (TABLE 2).

TABLE 2
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES IN THE FIRM INCLUDING OWNER

Number of Employees in the Firm	Number of Businesses in the Study
1	16
2	19
3	5
4	5
5	5
8	1
10+	4
Total	55

For the purposes of the study, Small businesses were classified as either manufacturing, retail, or service (TABLE 3). These classifications were used to distinguish the nature of the product or service provided by the business.

TABLE 3
TYPES OF SMALL BUSINESSES INVOLVED IN THE STUDY

Business Classification	Number
Manufacturing	5
Retail	20
Service	30
Total	55

Data for the study was collected through direct observation of the businesses involved and by monitoring websites, telephone messages, and social media sites. None of the data collected in the survey was of a confidential nature and small business owners declined questions explaining their decisions. Finally, 100 random customers were surveyed by the researchers to determine if they were confused by their States' use of essential versus non-essential classifications. Seventy-eight percent of the customers surveyed indicated that they were confused by the classifications and 58% stated their confusion affected their initial buying decisions.

RESEARCH RESULTS

An analysis of the data collected by from the study revealed the following three themes:

1. Small business owners liberally interrupted state mandated classifications of essential versus non-essential business.
2. Communication techniques used by small business to convey their businesses status were inconsistent and confusing.
3. Small business owners underutilized social media platforms to communicate their status under state mandated stay at home orders.

Theme 1

The first theme to emerge from the data revealed that small business owners inconsistently applied the classifications of essential versus non-essential as defined by state mandated stay at home orders to their business situations. Of the fifty-five businesses involved in the survey, thirty-two or 58.2% of the businesses fell into the non-essential classification. Fifteen or 46.9% of these non-essential businesses remained open during the stay at home order period. Seven of the non-essential businesses fell into the retail sector. Four or 57.1% of the non-essential retail businesses remaining opened sold specialty foods that fell outside of the state's definitions of essential "Stores that sell groceries and medicine, Food, beverage, licensed marijuana production, and agriculture, and Restaurants for consumption off-premises classifications". These small businesses changed their product mix and business models to increase their appearance of being classified essential and remained open. For example, some non-essential retail businesses added either carry-out or curbside service. This group of non-essential small businesses chose to remain open and went unchallenged by local authorities. The remaining three small businesses were small one-person traditional retailers (TABLE 4) that remained open by appointment. Both manufacturing small businesses involved in this study, classified as non-essential, remained closed as directed.

TABLE 4
NON-ESSENTIAL SMALL BUSINESSES INVOLVED IN THE STUDY

Business Classification	Number	Closed	Open	% Open
Manufacturing	2	2	0	0.0
Retail	12	5	7	58.3
Service	18	10	8	44.4
Total	32	17	15	46.9

Eighteen or 56.2% of the non-essential businesses involved in the study were service in nature. Eight or 44.4% of these businesses remained open during the state mandated stay at home order. All of these businesses fell outside any approved essential business classification. Half of these businesses were personal service in nature and should have remained closed. The remaining four service small business involved in the study argued that they fell into in to either the "Home-based care and services" or "Manufacture, distribution, and supply chain for critical products and industries" classifications remaining open during the stay-at-home period. None of these business owners decisions to remain open we challenged by local authorities.

Twenty-three or 41.8% of the small businesses involved in the study fell into the essential classification. Sixteen or 69.6% of those businesses remained open during their state's stay at home order (TABLE 5). The three small essential manufacturing firms involved in the study, closely followed their state's stay-at-home orders. Six or 60% of the ten essential retail businesses remained open during the stay at home order. All of the essential retail businesses fell into the either the "Stores that sell groceries and medicine or Restaurants for consumption off premises" classifications. Of the four essential retail business remaining

closed, one informed customers of the need to take extra precautions during the pandemic and three closed permanently due to poor sales. All of the small businesses classified as essential service involved in the study remained open during the state mandated stay at home order.

**TABLE 5
ESSENTIAL SMALL BUSINESSES INVOLVED IN THE STUDY**

Business Classification	Number	Closed	Open	% Open
Manufacturing	3	3	0	0.0
Retail	10	4	6	60.0
Service	10	0	10	100.0
Total	23	7	16	69.6

The classifications of essential and non-essential businesses were an attempt by state officials to bring about an orderly and safe managerial process throughout the stay at home period. Many states, especially in small communities, left enforcement issues to local authorities. Thus, provided local officials and small business owners the opportunity to interpret these definitions to their benefit resulting in inconsistent and confusing crisis management (Rodriquez, 2020).

Theme 2

Adding to the confusion of the stay-at-home orders were the inconsistent techniques used by business owners to communicate their status to customers (TABLE 6). At beginning of the crisis, nine or 16.4% of the fifty-five small businesses involved in the study simply placed a sign on the door of their establishment communicating their status during the stay at home order. All but two of the signs were written on 8.5 x 11 inch printer paper with messages too small to read from the street or side walk. Eleven or 20% of the businesses left a message on their telephone recorders conveying the status of their business during the stay at home order. Nine businesses or 81.8% used telephone messages in conjunction with some other communication media. Two businesses used telephone messages as their sole communication technique. Four or 7.3% of the small businesses only placed a message on their websites while two or 3.6% used social media as their sole communication technique. Nearly half or 49.1% of the small businesses involved in the study did nothing to communicate their status to customers relying instead on local media outlets to communicate State mandates relating to stay at home orders.

**TABLE 6
TECHNIQUES USED BY SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS TO COMMUNICATE THEIR
STAY-AT-HOME STATUS**

Communication Technique	Number	%
Sign on Door	9	16.4
Telephone Message Only	2	3.6
Message on Website Only	4	7.3
Social Media Platform Only	2	3.6
Multiple Techniques	11	20.0
No communication	27	49.1
Total	55	100.0

Confusion over the status of businesses continued to plague customers as states phased-in their reopening plans. Thirteen or 23.6% of the small businesses only placed signs on their doors communicating their compliance with their State’s phased-in reopening plan. Communication techniques such as messages

on telephone recorders, websites, and social media platforms went essentially unused as parts of the business owners' reopening plans (TABLE 7). Forty businesses or 72.8% of the small businesses involved in the study chose not to communicate their reopening plans to customers, deferring to local media for general message communication. Lacking specific reopening information, customer remained confused noting that many of the businesses involved altered their open hours and/or operations plans to comply with social distancing regulations (Edwards, 2020).

TABLE 7
TECHNIQUES USED BY SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS TO COMMUNICATE THEIR RELEASE FROM STAY-AT-HOME STATUS

Communication Technique	Number	%
Sign on Door	13	23.6
Telephone Message Only	0	0.0
Message on Website Only	0	0.0
Social Media Platform Only	1	1.8
Multiple Techniques	1	1.8
No communication	40	72.8
Total	55	100.0

Theme 3

One unanticipated study finding was the underutilization of websites and social media platforms as a means to communicate business status by the small business owners involved in the study. The majority or 83.6% of the small businesses involved in the study had a Website and 78.2% had an active Facebook page (TABLE 8). In addition, 45.5% of these businesses had an active presence in either Twitter or Instagram. The study revealed that only eight or 17.4% of the businesses used to their websites to communicate critical COVID 19 information to their customers. Despite the popularity and convenience of social media, only four or 9.3% of the businesses used their platforms as a communication device.

TABLE 8
SOCIAL MEDIA AVAILABLE FOR USE BY SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS TO COMMUNICATE STATUS DURING STAY-AT-HOME ORDER

Social Media Platform	Number of Available Businesses	%	Number Used for COVID 19 Communication	%
Website	46	83.6	8	17.4
Facebook	43	78.2	4	9.3
Other	25	45.5	0	0.0

CONCLUSION

The first conclusion from the study is that many small businesses classified as nonessential found a way to remain open during the stay at home orders. Of the nonessential retail businesses involved in the study, 58.3% found a way to stay open. In addition, 44.4% of the nonessential service businesses remained open. The vague language of the stay at home orders and their inconsistent enforcement by municipalities aided the action of these business owners. The confusion as to business status increased confusion among customers. Customer confusion was compounded by the fact that some small businesses involved in the study and classified as essential chose to remain closed.

The second finding from the study was that many small owners failed their customers through ineffective communication. Approximately half or of the business owners chose not to communicate their status as the stay at home orders went into effect and 72.8% of these same owners chose not to communicate their status as they were released from the order. These business owners relied on State issued public service announcements to communicate their business status. Twenty percent of the business owners involved in the study chose to employ multiple methods of communication such a telephone messages, or posts on websites and social media platforms to communicate their initial shutdown status, however, only 1.8% of these same owners chose to communicate their status upon release their stay-at-home orders. Not surprisingly, many business owners relied on door signs as their sole method of communication to customers. At the imposition of the stay at home orders, 16.4% of the survey participants hung a door sign to communicate their status and upon release from the orders 23.6% of the owners used a door sign as the sole means of communication.

The third finding from the study was how little digital communication was used during the stay at home order period. The majority of the business or 83.6% involved in the study had websites yet only 17.4% of the business owners chose to use the sites as effective communication devices. Social media had a strong presence among the small businesses surveyed. Active Facebook accounts were found for 78.2% of these businesses. For the duration of the stay at home period, only 9.3% of the accounts were used to communicate with customers. In addition to Facebook, 45.5% of the small businesses survey were active of other social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter. None of these other platforms were used by business owners to communicate with customers during the stay at home orders.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study was limited to small businesses operating in a Midwestern community with a population less than 20,000. These results may not be representative of all similar sized municipalities. Further, the majority of survey participants were small businesses employing less than ten employees. This analysis was intended to give a general understanding of the confusion facing businesses owns and customers during state mandated Stay-at-home orders. Therefore, it is dependent upon the judgment of the reader and specific settings of the region as to the appropriateness of its finding's. Future study can be directed to focus on narrower areas of concern and analysis to validate the results presented in this study.

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