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UNNGED

Three companies and their leaders granted us access to their business triumphs and tragedies, along with their personal opinions and hopes. As we continue to get through this together, let's relive April 2020, a tense month filled with new accounts, lost vendors, urgent funding and galvanized teams. Here's what happened.

BY LAURIE HILEMAN, LILLIAN CHAPA AND JENNIFER JONES DONATELLI

COVID-19 CHRONICLES: A HECTIC TIME AT A GLANCE

The following pages present a chronological look at how three industry companies persevered as the pandemic took hold. Here are some milestones:

AN INSIDE LOOK AT 3 COMPANIES



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TUESDAY, APRIL 28

Suncoast Marketing: Large Orders, New Funding, Cold Beer

BY LAURIE HILEMAN



LOCATION:
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

EMPLOYEES: 35

KEY PRODUCTS/SERVICES:
Print, print management, promotional products, cross-media services, e-commerce (B2B and B2C solutions), promotional products, creative services, SEO and internet marketing, web development, warehouse and distribution

WEBSITE:
suncoastmarketing.com

FRIDAY, APRIL 3, 4:30 A.M., DESERTED STREET

Randy Eubanks cruises toward the offices of Suncoast Marketing.

The guardhouse stands empty near a business complex devoid of cars. Pulling up to the office, Randy Eubanks, vice president of sales at Suncoast Marketing, knows what lies ahead. Hallways will be silent. On a normal day, they would have been bustling with 35 employees.

Today is not normal. "It's eerie," says Eubanks, reflecting on what's quickly become his new normal.

For two weeks now, Suncoast employees have been working remotely in response to the Florida governor's stay-at-home order designed to combat the spread of COVID-19. Only three warehouse workers and three senior team members stagger shifts to cover business hours. Vendors and clients are no longer allowed in the building.

Suncoast is lucky. While many nonessential businesses were forced to close, Suncoast is considered essential because it provides services to medical, government and food-related industries.

In an early move to protect the entire Suncoast family, the company reduced everyone's hours by 20%. Still, traditional work is tight. Eubanks, along with his partners and controller, has spent the week exploring a Florida small business bridge loan and the Small Business Administration's

(SBA's) Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) to help them weather the storm.

They also updated the firm's pandemic plan, drafted amid the 2009 swine flu outbreak, to ensure they purchased enough virtual desktop interface (VDI) licenses to allow all employees to work from home securely.

Meanwhile, here in Southern Florida, where tourism and hospitality reign supreme, local markets are devastated. Eubanks surmises the number of projects canceled or on hold today is higher than the total number of such projects during the company's 40-year history.

To survive, Suncoast has pivoted, providing masks, face shields, gloves, fabric slippers and other personal protective equipment (PPE) to essential businesses. Fellow PSDA members — Eubanks affectionately refers to them as the "Gang of Five" — share trusted PPE suppliers, connecting Suncoast to new vendors around the world.

"It's unbelievable what's happened," Eubanks says. "Our business development person is solely dedicated to tracking PPE orders, maintaining inventory and keeping everything in order. Orders are cash upfront ... or it would kill us otherwise."

**FRIDAY, APRIL 10, 3:07 A.M.,
TARMAC IN CHINA**

Five different Suncoast orders for PPE await approval from Chinese authorities so they can ship by air.

The orders are late, and Suncoast’s hands are tied. The Chinese government claims to be buckling down to address problems with defective face masks leaving the country.

But Eubanks isn’t buying it. “They just want a bigger piece of the action for themselves,” he says.

His voice sounds tired. Eubanks and his team have spent most of the week fielding calls from anxious clients and tracking orders for PPE coming in from several global vendors. Orders like the ones stuck in China. Or those sitting on the ground in Japan. Or trapped in customs at the U.S. border in Alaska.

“It’s hard to know what’s going on from day to day, even hour to hour,” Eubanks says. Governments worldwide are grappling with the virus in their own ways. Regulations change. Borders close. Businesses are left to find alternative solutions on the fly.

Closer to home, the virus is closing in. Dade County has just

announced face masks are required in public, and noncomplying citizens can be fined. Beaches are closed.

For Suncoast, a few orders for PPE in late January and early February have morphed into a frenzy of clients hoping to keep their employees safe and businesses open. Truckers looking to fill up with gas aren’t allowed out of their cabs without a mask. Waste companies, haulers, recycling companies, MRI scan centers, chiropractors, moving companies ... everyone wants protection.

Eubanks never imagined he would be selling PPE. Suncoast employees spend their days on the phone with vendors, freight companies and worried clients, all in an effort to get orders to their destinations as quickly as possible.

“It was one thing when we did outer garments for high visibility in construction areas, for example. But now it’s booties, gloves, face shields. Every day is a new product.”



On a normal day, the Suncoast office is a bustling space with 35 employees. With stay-at-home orders in effect in Florida, only six employees occupy the office, while the rest work remotely. Hours have been reduced for all by 20% to mitigate the need for more drastic changes.

“We stood around reminiscing about the good-old days ... 60 days ago. Everyone enjoyed sharing plans for what they would do once this is all behind us.”

— **Randy Eubanks**, *Vice President of Sales, Suncoast Marketing*

**MONDAY, APRIL 13, 7 P.M.,
RANDY EUBANKS' HOUSE**
Randy Eubanks' new banker is calling.

The phone rings.

Eubanks had just sat down with his wife to eat dinner. He picks up the ringing phone and jokes to her that maybe he should put his dinner in the fridge — this is probably going to take a while.

It's Jeni from First Horizons Bank. She's calling to start a PPP application for Suncoast Marketing.

Since he had first heard about the federal government's newest round of financing to help small businesses meet payroll in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, Eubanks and his partner, Bob Scala, have been trying to apply for the loan with their long-time bank, Wells Fargo.

But to no avail. Word on the street is that money in the first round of PPP funding is running out. The partners are anxious to ensure the livelihoods of their Suncoast family in the uncertain weeks ahead.

“I love our rep at Wells Fargo, but the bank itself is an utter failure,” says a frustrated Eubanks later. “We heard nothing for days on end, other than we were ‘in the queue.’ Only when negative press began to emerge did they tell us they couldn't do the loan and that we should apply elsewhere. It nearly cost us our chance at the money!”

That's when Eubanks turned to First Horizons, a local bank and client of Suncoast. When he asked if First Horizons could help with the loan, the bank responded immediately, ‘We'd love to, but we've got to do it now.’ Jeni was on the phone with him that night.

For the next five hours, Randy and his controller share payroll data, federal identification numbers and other information required for the application with Jeni, finishing just before midnight.

“You can guess who we'll be doing our banking with from now on,” Eubanks says.

THURSDAY, APRIL 23, 8:30 A.M., SUNCOAST MARKETING OFFICES
\$10,000 pops up in Suncoast Marketing's banking account.

Today is a good day.

Randy Eubanks arrives at the office to see a \$10,000 advance from the SBA's Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) program sitting in the company's account. Traditional print, mailing and fulfillment jobs are starting to come back online — albeit slowly — and nearly all of the company's back orders of PPE are in.

Several employees have come to work on a special fulfillment project for a national sports association. Fortunately, Suncoast's new facility, with its wide-open warehouse and workspaces, is conducive to social distancing — a

foreign concept to most Americans until events of the past few weeks wove it, inextricably, into their lives.

Later that afternoon, funds for the PPP loan also arrive. Randy sends an all-staff email at 3:30 p.m. to announce the news, ensuring everyone that full funding and payroll is secure for the next eight weeks.

"It's a relief," Eubanks says. "While I think we would have been able to ride out the storm, the extra money eases everyone's concerns." Having heard of the late night phone call that helped make it happen, two employees stop by

Randy's desk to personally thank him.

By 5 p.m., a happy hour has sprung up on the outside patio at Suncoast and life, for a moment, seems normal. Laughter fills the air as the small collection of vendors, staff and clients mill around, safely distant from each other, enjoying the Florida sunshine and cold cocktails.

"It was an incredible, impromptu event. We stood around reminiscing about the good-old days ... 60 days ago," recalls Eubanks with a laugh. "Everyone enjoyed sharing plans for what they would do once this is all behind us."

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**THURSDAY, APRIL 30, 11:30 A.M.,
SUNCOAST MARKETING OFFICES**

Lunch at Suncoast is Chicago-style hot dogs and Italian beef sandwiches.

It's the end of April, and a few Suncoast employees have made their way into the office to finalize reports and close out the month. Randy enjoys lunch in the conference room with his friend Norm, the company's VP of marketing. A few employees gather in the break room; others choose to eat in their offices.

"We're thrilled," says Eubanks of these brief moments of normalcy at the end of a long month. "The lack of social interaction has really taken a toll on people." He says employees remain cautious when it comes to wearing masks around the office and maintaining appropriate social distancing but that it's nice to gather safely for a day.

April numbers are up over of the previous year, but Eubanks attributes the increase to the large orders of PPE making their way through the books. "PPE is definitely driving the show right now," he says. Protective equipment has accounted for nearly two-thirds of Suncoast's business for the month, while traditional print and promotional jobs are down.

But Eubanks remains "cautiously optimistic." He's thankful to live in a state with a pro-business governor (unlike what he's seeing in other states like New York and Michigan) and a warm climate that might be conducive to tamping down the virus. While many counties still require citizens to wear face masks out in public, plans are in place to reopen businesses within the next few days and weeks.

As the virus trends down from its peak, Eubanks sees Suncoast's traditional business following a reflective arc, slowly building back up. More broadly, he views life during the pandemic as a mixture of tragedy and triumph, loss and gain.

"While it has sickened and killed many, it has also slowed life down, allowing many of us to reconnect with family, friends and co-workers in a way that our hectic lifestyles have not allowed in years," Eubanks says. "As in all of life, there are always positives to be found if one takes the time to notice." ■

Laurie Hileman is a freelance writer living in Freeland, Michigan.

For Suncoast, a few orders for PPE in late January and early February have morphed into a frenzy of clients hoping to keep their employees safe and businesses open.

All Barcode Systems: Ford Calling, Sales Increasing, Pressure Mounting

BY LILLIAN CHAPA

ALL BARCODE
SYSTEMS 

LOCATION:

Westminster, California

EMPLOYEES: 5

**KEY PRODUCTS/
SERVICES:**

Barcode labels,
printers, readers and systems

WEBSITE:

allbarcodesystems.com

**SATURDAY, APRIL 4, 11:30 A.M.,
BARRY PETENBRINK'S HOUSE**

*Ford Motor Company is calling an
ABS sales representative on a weekend.*

Barry Petenbrink, a sales representative for All Barcode Systems (ABS), answers a work call even though it's a Saturday. A representative from Ford Motor Company is on the other end, asking if ABS can provide labels and printers for the new initiative to produce ventilators at Ford's Dearborn, Michigan, manufacturing plant.

The need is urgent — Ford announced just days before its intention to produce 50,000 ventilators in 100 days, starting on April 20. Petenbrink ensures Ford that ABS will spring into action to meet Ford's needs.

On Monday, April 6, ABS receives an order from Ford for 60 printers and 4.8 million labels. Petenbrink dials up ABS President Scott Steiner to inform him of the new customer and its urgent order. Petenbrink tells Ford they won't have to pay expedite fees due to the critical need for ventilators and that ABS will process and ship the order by April 15.

It's shaping up to be a busy month.

MONDAY, APRIL 13, 5:30 A.M., ABS OFFICES*Scott Steiner is a half hour early, and he's holding disinfectant.*

Steiner arrives at the office 30 minutes earlier than normal, a new habit he's picked up since California's safer-at-home order was put into place. Although the space at ABS is set up so three employees can work 30 feet apart from each other, Steiner disinfects common area surfaces each morning.

He feels fortunate that his small business can retain all its employees and keep its doors open as an essential business, but his mind is on the uncertain future of the economy and how it might impact ABS. He and the company's other two owners have been debating whether to apply for the PPP loan, and he is anxious to do so.

"My internal barometer tells me to save that money for the folks that really do need it right now," he says. "But at the same time, several of our net-30 accounts are closed and have not paid their bills, and we have a number of accounts that have seen significant reductions. Our standpoint on whether to apply is whether we'll have the business in the next few months to support our current payroll, and I'm not sure we will."

Although business has been in flux, everyone is working overtime to handle unusually large orders from old and new customers alike. But Steiner knows the trend won't

last, and he's been hearing a similar sentiment when talking with vendors and customers.

"I keep hearing this echoed — the end of this year, and first and second quarters of next year, will see a huge drop in business," he says. "I agree with that. Our customers are buying so much right now because they're afraid that once they need something, they'll have to wait for it, like hand sanitizer. So, they're stocking up now, but not using any of it, and we won't hear from them for a while."

Applying for the PPP loan isn't as straightforward as Steiner had hoped. He has checked U.S. Bank's online PPP portal countless times since applications launched April 3, and reflexively opens it again this morning, searching in vain for updates. The bank has done a poor job of rolling out applications, he says, and its communication about who is eligible has been even worse. As of now, Steiner learns, he can't apply because ABS is technically a multi-owner business.

"I haven't even heard of anyone whose application has been accepted yet," Steiner says. "It's great to hear that the government is doing this, but like everything else, it's hurry up and wait. And I'm still waiting."

ABS is now applying to become a certified Ford supplier — if the company is accepted, it will be in Ford's database of printer and label vendors, potentially securing additional business for years to come.

TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 4:30 P.M., FORD MANUFACTURING PLANT

Ford is gearing up for rapid production of ventilators and needs ABS again.

Although Ford's initial printer order hasn't been shipped yet — it will be overnighted tomorrow — the auto giant calls ABS and places a second order for 60 printers and 4.8 million more labels. Ford is gearing up for rapid production of ventilators slated to start in just six days.

The Ford orders are pushing

ABS to its limit, both in turnaround time and financially. Steiner has to handle this second large order from Ford while simultaneously figuring how to pay his vendors for these unforeseen orders. While he has a direct relationship with the manufacturer, he has a small line of credit with them. The manufacturer just

doubled that credit line due to the circumstances, but ABS still owes them \$10,000. Steiner doesn't expect payment from Ford for another few weeks.

Steiner picks up the phone to call his vendors and his bank to figure out how to fund and fulfill this new order for lifesaving supplies.

“Is that immediate need to get paid worth the potential of shutting a business down permanently and putting more people out of work?”

—**Scott Steiner**, *President, ABS*

**MONDAY, APRIL 20,
1 P.M., ABS OFFICES**

Steiner pulls up U.S. Bank's loan application portal and closes it in frustration.

Steiner opens his inbox and begins to compose an email to U.S. Bank's local branch. It has been four days since he learned that the first round of PPP loan money has run out nationwide, and he's incensed that he didn't even get a chance to apply.

He documents his anger in the email, outlining the ways in which the bank failed him and other small businesses in their time of need. "I might even close my accounts and go to the local community bank," he writes. "Every member of our community business association group got their paperwork in through the small local bank, while I was sitting on the sidelines as you guys tried to figure out how to make a website. That scares me about your bank."

After he sends the email, he notices a new message in his inbox: an invitation to join a class action lawsuit against the SBA and big banks for mishandling the funds.

"I'm still thinking about whether or not I want to open an account at a regional bank," Steiner later says. "And I appreciate what they're doing with that lawsuit, but they take years if not decades to resolve, so it won't really help us beyond telling the public what's going on — you might as well just write a blog about it instead."

Paycheck Protection Pro

FRIDAY, APRIL 24, 5:30 A.M., STARBUCKS DRIVE-THRU LINE

As Steiner inches forward, he sees something that sticks with him.

Steiner pulls into the Starbucks drive-thru line to order drinks for the office, like he does every Friday morning. As he waits in line, he mentally goes over the list of the increasing number of customers who have told him they can't pay their invoices — or worse, have stopped communicating with ABS altogether. He wants to be sensitive to other small businesses that are struggling to stay afloat, but to complete his own orders, Steiner needs to be able to buy materials from vendors. Some of those vendors are also struggling financially.

"It's a Domino effect," he says. "At the end of the line, who is going to get knocked down and not get back up? You want to help, but at what point as a businessperson do you stop being sensitive and say that you can't help them out anymore?"

Steiner inches his car forward in the line. He watches as the driver in front of him pays with her phone app and then, after fumbling around for a moment, passes a \$20 bill through the window to the masked barista inside. "Oh, I don't need this — this is too much," he hears the barista say, but the woman insists she keep the money, thanking her before driving away.

As he leaves the parking lot with his coffee, Steiner considers the importance of simple acts of kindness. "This kind of thing really speaks to humanity," he says. "And it's not just individuals, but businesses, too."

Just the other day, Steiner had received an email from a vendor informing all customers that the vendor was going to extend payment terms to net 45 for the next few months to provide flexibility to suppliers that might be struggling financially.

"That generosity of spirit goes beyond you and me as individuals," Steiner says. "I think the business community is stepping up even more — they're making these gestures, and for no reason other than to give back — not because they make the news but because it's the right thing to do."



ABS partnered with print manufacturer TSC on a rush order of labels and printers, shipped to Ford Motor Company's Dearborn, Michigan, plant. The printers and labels were used for life-saving ventilators being produced as the threat of the virus increased exponentially. Pictured here is TSC employee David Smit.

MONDAY, APRIL 27, 6:30 A.M., ABS OFFICES*It's a race against time for the SBA's second round of funding.*

Steiner is on pins and needles, waiting to hear back from U.S. Bank. Things have progressed rapidly over the past few days, once it became clear that the government was going to approve additional funding for the PPP. The previous Wednesday, after waiting impatiently for guidance from U.S. Bank, he logged on to the application portal and was shocked to see that he was finally able to pre-emptively apply for the loan. He had completed all necessary paperwork that evening and then had received a call that he was conditionally approved by the bank.

The next critical step is set to take place today — submitting the application to the SBA once the government group opens its portal for a second round of funding. Yesterday afternoon, Steiner had received an

email from U.S. Bank informing him that his application was ready to be submitted, but when he had logs in to the bank's website early this morning to make sure everything is in order, he sees an indicator that his application was only 60% completed.

"My hope is that our situation is simply a glitch — we have the email stating the application was ready to be submitted, so if that's true, then that's wonderful," Steiner says. "The email also stated I wouldn't get any updates until Wednesday night, two days from now. But then I saw that the application was possibly incomplete this morning, so I'm trying to reach out to person I've been working with. But I haven't heard back yet ... don't tell me I'm going to miss this second round, too."

MONDAY, APRIL 27, 3 P.M., ABS OFFICES*ABS is applying to become a certified Ford supplier.*

ABS sends out its last orders to Ford this afternoon, following a three-week sprint of fulfilling orders, processing back orders, overnight shipping, programming printers, troubleshooting and carefully balancing finances so everyone involved can be paid on time and without ABS securing additional lines of credit. ABS is now applying to become a certified Ford supplier — if the company is accepted, it will be in Ford's database of printer and label vendors, potentially securing additional business for years to come.

Before Steiner leaves the office, he checks his email one more time to find a message from U.S. Bank, stating that ABS's loan application was indeed submitted to the SBA. Steiner lets out a long, relieved exhale before walking out the door.

THURSDAY, APRIL 30, 5 P.M., SCOTT STEINER'S HOUSE

It's been the third most profitable month in ABS' history, but warning signs mount.

Steiner relaxes at home after what has been one of the busiest months of his career at ABS. While the first two weeks of April saw less business than normal, the last two weeks made up for that and more, leading to the third most profitable month in the history of the company.

"I might take a day off to get away from the office," he says. "But we ended up with such a great month, so I can't complain too loudly about the extra hours."

At the same time, Steiner can't help but think of the increasing number of statements he had to send out earlier in the week to accounts with outstanding invoices. If a customer hasn't paid its invoice within 30 days, ABS sends them statements every Wednesday. The number of statements ABS sent this week doubled the amount from the week before, a trend Steiner fears will continue. One-quarter of ABS's accounts are now past due — a sobering number. ABS is waiving finance charges as needed, but the situation is fraught with challenges.

"One customer said that they have moved all payables to net 60, so now our customers are dictating terms to us, and we have to go along with it," Steiner says. "The last thing you want to do is force them to make a payment that would jeopardize their entire company. They're still a customer, and we need their business if they survive. Is that immediate need to get paid worth the potential of shutting a business down permanently and putting more people out of work? You have to balance the ethics with the reality of you paying your bills."

Steiner also received an email confirming that ABS had been issued an SBA loan number. This victory, too, is tinged with uncertainty — Steiner is concerned the loan may be more trouble than it's worth. "Have you seen the instructions document from the IRS?" he asks. "I read one page and

had to take an aspirin because it did not make sense to me. Literally, it's like someone gave me a treasure map without an X and told me to figure it out. It's like whoever wrote this thing just took an MBA class on how to write jibber jabber. It's ridiculous."

After trying to decipher the seven-page document, Steiner had asked other business owners, PSDA members and his accountant what he needs to know about the loan. He learned that once a business receives a loan, it has eight weeks to spend 75% of the money on employee wages — a challenge in its own right, because the loan amount is for 10 weeks' worth of wages. The other 25% should go toward essentials like rent and utilities. If the money is properly spent and documented within the eight-week window, the loan is forgiven, effectively becoming a grant that does not have to be paid back. But if the business can't meet those terms, they take the money on as a loan with a 1% fixed annual interest rate over 24 months.

To make matters more complicated, Steiner writes off these monthly expenses — wages, rent and utilities — on his taxes because ABS files as an S corporation. However, California tax law states that if ABS uses the PPP money to pay for those same costs, Steiner and the other owners won't be able to write off those expenses at the end of the year.

Steiner says he's frightened at how convoluted the loan is and wonders what might happen to other small business owners who are desperate for the money and don't read the fine print. "There's now a huge question mark on this money. At this point, after everything I went through to apply for this thing, I'm unsure whether we're going to use it, return it or consider it a loan." ■

Lillian Chapa is a freelancer based in Baltimore.

Tabco: Helping Schools, Learning Zoom, Anticipating Change

BY JENNIFER JONES DONATELLI



LOCATION:

Terre Haute, Indiana

EMPLOYEES: 40+

KEY PRODUCTS/SERVICES:

Print, promo, apparel and creative

WEBSITE: tabco.com

THURSDAY, APRIL 2, 11 A.M., VIGO COUNTY, INDIANA

Vigo County School Corporation needs student packets produced on-demand.

Nearly 16,000 students in Vigo County, Indiana, are still adjusting to remote learning. A couple weeks earlier, Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb had announced school would be conducted remotely until May 1 (a deadline that would later extend to encompass the entire school year). High school students were now receiving online instruction, but students in grades K-8 required a different solution.

"The school corporation didn't have a good online option for the lower grades, so they sent everyone home with a homework packet," says Kris Bilyeu, president of distributor Tabco.

But, as prone to happen with kids, many packets got misplaced or never made it home in the first place. So the Vigo County School Corporation contacts Tabco about printing and mailing extra packets on-demand. "It started with 20 calls one day, 60 requests the next day," Bilyeu says, looking back. "In the end, we printed just under 1,000 packets."

Though the project is outside Tabco's normal scope, Bilyeu and his team are happy to take it on. Many of Tabco's employees attended school in the area, and at least six currently have a relative or spouse in the school corporation.

"Our goal is to help and do the right thing, so we cut our margins way down to make sure it was a service," says Bilyeu, adding that Tabco has long worked with local schools to provide fundraising items and spirit apparel.

The effort pays off and results in Tabco's most popular Facebook post ever with 86 reactions, 21 comments and 97 shares (as of May 8), along with a reach of more than 7,000 people. "We did it because it was the right thing to do and we were in the position to do it," says Bilyeu, "but we've also been able to build goodwill and expand our social reach."

MONDAY, APRIL 6, 9 A.M., TABCO OFFICES

Office personnel are working half shifts, and everyone is getting on Zoom.

A new normal is taking shape inside Tabco's facilities, where many employees are still reporting to work. To alleviate any fears or concerns, Bilyeu enlists a nightly cleaning crew and reduces office personnel to half shifts. For meetings, everyone gathers via Zoom instead of in a common area. As for Tabco's sales force, the entire team is working remotely and has started conducting both internal and external

meetings exclusively on Zoom.

"[Splitting shifts] helps with social distancing and having fewer people in the same place at the same time," Bilyeu says. "They still monitor emails when they're not here, and they are paid for a full day. The call volume is down, and we're not quite as busy, so it's important we do what we can to keep everyone in a safe atmosphere."

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8, 9 A.M., LOCAL GROCERY STORES

Hand sanitizer is hard to come by, but Tabco's clients want gallons of it.

Shoppers are in a flurry to buy personal safety products like hand sanitizer. On grocery store shelves, those products are difficult to find.

Until the COVID-19 crisis, Tabco had regularly provided its customers with small two-ounce bottles of hand sanitizer as promotional product for golf outings or conventions. And now? "My customers are asking if I can get gallons of it," Bilyeu says.

The requests for hand sanitizer go hand in hand with a variety of requests Tabco is now receiving for other types of PPE such as masks and gloves. Though the requests represent crisis-meeting-opportunity for Tabco, Bilyeu wants to respond in a thoughtful, appropriate manner.

"We're walking that tightrope where we don't want to look like we're trying to make money off a bad situation, but we want to help people get the tools they need and get through this crisis so we can all get back to normal," he says.

And as Bilyeu will soon learn, it's a tall task putting the distribution effort into motion. Much of the product comes from overseas and is expensive to import, he says, so availability and pricing seem to change by the hour. "Our sales guys are basically trying to sell something that is a moving target. But we love a good challenge, and if we can be the hero for the customer now, we'll be top of mind [for their business] later."

"We're walking that tightrope where we don't want to look like we're trying to make money off of a bad situation, but we want to help people get the tools they need and get through this crisis so we can all get back to normal."

—Kris Bilyeu, *President, Tabco*

**FRIDAY, APRIL 10, 10:35 A.M.,
TABCO OFFICES**

One of Tabco's vendors is closing for good.

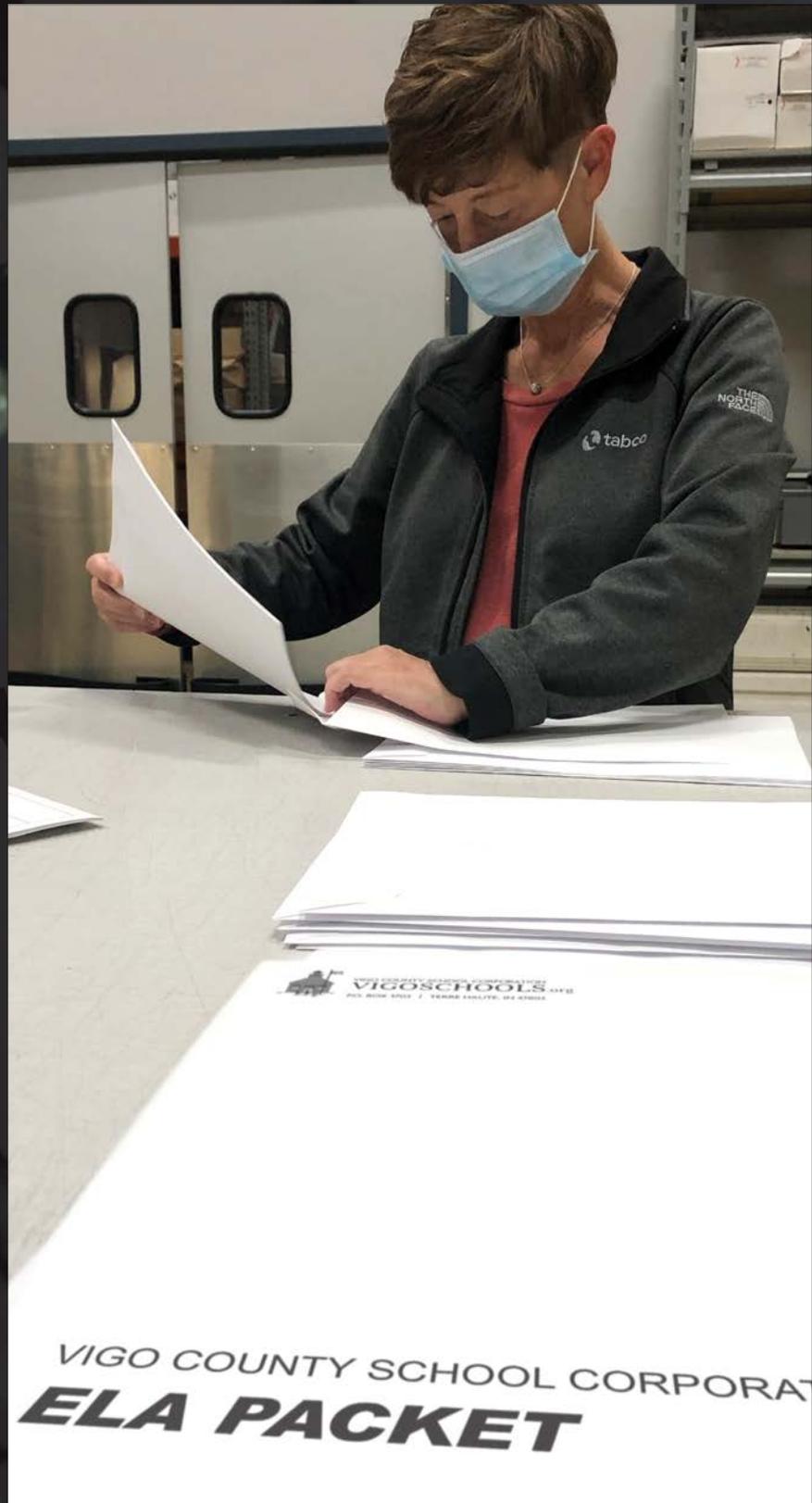
It's a not-so-"Good Friday" for one of Tabco's vendors, an Indiana-based small forms printer that will be closing its doors permanently. Bilyeu has just received the news.

"We got a little panicked, but they will finish all jobs in process," he says. "Though it wasn't a big part of our [overall] business, it's personal to us because of our relationships with our vendors."

Bilyeu also has stressors of his own to consider — Tabco's revenue is down by an estimated 50%, and Bilyeu believes "it will get worse before it gets better." Luckily, the company has just been approved for a PPP loan from the SBA, a process that took just over a week, thanks to Bilyeu's strong relationship with his local banker.

"We're banking on what the government is doing, so to speak, and we've been paying our employees on the faith that those programs would come through," Bilyeu says. "It's exciting what they are doing to allow us to keep our employees employed instead of sending them home."

Tabco employees work from a safe social distance to fill just under 1,000 learning packets, sent to children in the Vigo County school system. The project hits close to home, as many employees once attended the schools themselves, or now know relatives and spouses that work for the school corporation.



TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 1:30 P.M., HOMES NATIONWIDE

Recipients open the mail and receive a package handled by Tabco.

Around the country, employees who were slated to attend in-person training sessions for various companies are instead receiving boxes at their homes — all as part of a project Tabco handled for Lessonly, an Indianapolis-based training software company. The boxes contain co-branded coffee mugs, local coffee, customized T-shirts and a personal handwritten note welcoming attendees to an upcoming virtual training experience.

“Lessonly needed to pivot from in-person to virtual meetings quickly,” Bilyeu says. “They value the brand experience they deliver in person, so we helped

deliver that experience to their customers by sending promotional items in Lessonly-branded packaging.”

Bilyeu and his sales team are also experimenting with other offerings to support virtual meetings, including “meeting in a box,” which entails mailing potential customers a sample box so they can touch and feel products during a Zoom meeting. He foresees vendor meetings taking place on Zoom long after the COVID-19 crisis subsides.

“This whole process is opening our way to a different way of doing things,” he says. “As opposed to being afraid of it, we’re trying to embrace it and see where it takes us.”

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MONDAY, APRIL 20, 12 P.M., INDIANAPOLIS

Someone filed a complaint about Tabco not being “essential.”

Personnel at the Indiana Department of Labor (DOL) office sift through hundreds of complaints filed that question the “essential” designation for certain businesses.

Back in Terre Haute, Bilyeu has just learned Tabco is among them. It forces the Tabco team to “stop what [they] were doing, take a timeout and make a formal reply to the Department of Labor,” he says.

Bilyeu quickly resolves the issue and learns from a DOL contact that the vast majority of complaints filed have been unfounded. Tabco is no exception because it is a distributor of products to other essential businesses such as medical labs, manufacturers, hospitals, governments and school corporations.

It’s an unexpected snag, but Bilyeu is grateful for the opportunity to clarify exactly why Tabco is essential and conveys that to the company’s employees. “The situation helped us do some further research to come up with a good explanation about why we are essential and explain to the people in our office why we continue to be here,” he says.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 29, 5:30 P.M., TABCO OFFICES

After several hectic days, the Tabco team exhales.

On the heels of the previous project working with Vigo County schools, Tabco had won the opportunity to produce at-home instructional packets — this time to all 10,000 local elementary and middle school students. It received the purchase order, art and mailing list on Friday, April 24, with only one week to turn the job around.

This week, all hands have been on deck, inserting packets into envelopes and sealing them. “Everyone from the receptionist to the customer service people to the salespeople to management all stepped in and put in a shift,” Bilyeu says. “All 10,000 packets were printed and mailed by today. Everyone took pride in getting it done — and getting it done in a hurry. It became a really positive team-building event.”

After a shaky start obtaining PPE inventory, Bilyeu and his team have been filling those orders, too. “We started out with one vendor on some masks, but when the product came in and hit customs, it was sent back because it wasn’t packaged correctly,” he says. “That put us two weeks behind on some items. Now we have a good flow going with a reliable supplier who is getting a good turnaround time on masks. We’ve filled all of our open orders, and we have two more big orders coming.”

Those large orders are from a construction company and an amusement park, and with masks in high demand, Bilyeu anticipates more orders coming down the pike. He also predicts other future needs, such as floor graphics for banks and grocery stores designating where to

stand for proper social distancing. “These are the opportunities we have in front of us,” Bilyeu says. “This is not going to be short-term.”

In the meantime, work hours at Tabco are slowly returning back to normal, with employees staggering their times starting at 8 a.m. to cover the full workday. The sales team is still working remotely but may start going on occasional sales calls.

Overall, Bilyeu says, the goal is to “stay healthy, and we’ll be there with bells on — ready to roll — when things come back. For now, we just want to take care of our customers and our community.” ■

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