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SOAP DISPENSARY & KITCHEN STAPLES

The Soap Dispensary and Kitchen Staples (TSD) is a bulk refill store with the mission to “help our customers [and] our community reduce single use packaging waste; particularly plastic waste in everyday goods and groceries”. The small storefront in Vancouver has an incredible selection of cleaning solutions, personal hygiene needs, and kitchen staples, all available for customers to purchase in bulk quantities. The store also boasts a selection of products that help support their customers in living lower-waste lifestyles. Through their efforts, they divert approximately 20,000 plastic or single-use containers per month.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, owner Linh Truong described the store as a “busting...lively...it’s just like kind of a little hub”. Customers entered the store and they could choose from a variety of soap and food bulk items on the menu. Staff could either fill those products in the customer’s containers, or the customers could purchase (some) pre-packaged items in reusable containers to refill the next time. The store also hosted seasonal workshops and screenings to teach people how to make things themselves and live low waste.



Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

As a grocery and retail store, TSD remained open as an essential service business¹. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly changed operations for the store and its staff. Between March and April, sales dropped 40%, and were down by half compared to the same time last year.

Physical distancing requirements meant that the narrow store had to limit in-store customers to four at a time and therefore could not serve as many customers at one time. Furthermore, fewer customers were coming to shop in-person early in the pandemic when people were encouraged to stay at home.

Another challenge to the day-to-day operations of the store was the ability to refill containers brought by customers. The BC Provincial Health Services Authority suggests that “customers should only use reusable containers that are properly cleaned and sanitized”². The BC Ministry of Health recommends that grocery stores and markets, “do not sell bulk items except where staff dispense bulk items”³. TSD had to quickly pivot the store to a new retail platform that encompassed requirements for social distancing, and sanitization, while maintaining their core values.

¹ List of COVID-19 Essential Services. 12 June 2020. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-preparedness-response-recovery/covid-19-provincial-support/essential-services-covid-19>

² Information for grocery stores, restaurants and other food premises for employers and workers. 4 August 2020. <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/diseases-conditions/covid-19/employers-businesses/food-businesses>

³ COVID-19 Guidance to Retail Food and Grocery Stores. 16 April 2020. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/health/about-bc-s-health-care-system/office-of-the-provincial-health-officer/covid-19/covid-19-pho-guidance-grocery-stores.pdf>



Adapting with Sustainability in Mind

TSD's decision, as COVID-19 became a pandemic, marked a turning point for the business where they had to decide how they would sell products without being able to refill customers' containers. Meanwhile, customers were quickly shifting to using online shopping platforms to order groceries and household items to avoid shopping in stores where physical distancing is harder to maintain.

In just a few weeks, TSD set up an online ordering system. Customers would look up products and prices in a menu, then place their orders via an online form. Within a day or two, they could pick-up the order in-store or at curbside. With more online orders and fewer in-store customers, staff could fill orders without the pressure of numerous waiting customers, as well as focus their attention on the few customers that do come in the store.

"Because we didn't have as many customers coming through our store, we opened up an online ordering system."

How did they get products to customers without using a bunch of single use containers? TSD invested in thousands of glass jars of various sizes to hold different quantities of products and an industrial sanitizer. Customers paid a small fee for the container and received a refund when they bring back the empty container. Dry goods were packaged in paper bags made from 100% recycled paper and charged a small paper bag fee. While there was a large upfront investment in the jars themselves, more energy used to produce the jars, and more energy and water needed to run the industrial sanitizer to clean them, TSD believed that switching to the glass jars aligned with their low waste sustainability goals and was a better alternative than switching to single use plastic containers.

An unexpected outcome of switching to standardized jars along with online ordering was increased efficiency in filling orders. Pre-COVID-19, staff had to weigh all the containers before and after filling. Customers had to wait for their orders to be filled, which at busy times, could be upwards of 30 minutes to an hour.

"And now we have standard jars. We always know their weight, we always know that they're clean, they're in the right condition. So that's made our process so much more efficient."





TSD decided to pilot home delivery as an additional service for customers who were uncomfortable coming out to the store to pick up their order. This was seen as a “community service... to support people” but in the long run the service was not sustainable. TSD used their delivery van and collaborated with the WeCycle bicycle delivery service to reduce carbon emissions and air pollution. WeCycle provided delivery to areas that were closer to TSD within Vancouver and the delivery van serviced neighbourhoods that were further away, or orders that were too large to carry by bike. The partnership with WeCycle allowed TSD to continue providing some delivery while sustaining their core values of low carbon, low waste. It was a “wonderful solution... I think a lot of customers were also really happy about that.”

WeCycle made 164 deliveries and logged 261 km of bicycle travel, equivalent to 78 kg of carbon dioxide emissions avoided from van delivery.

The delivery service received excellent reviews from customers. However, it was operating at a financial loss since TSD offered it at a low or no additional charge to align with other grocery delivery services. The labour for the delivery driver and operating expenses for running the van were much higher than the additional revenue from the delivery orders, especially when orders were sparsely distributed in regions that were far from TSD.

The long trips to single destinations also contributed to additional carbon emissions, which TSD felt did not align with their low carbon, low waste sustainability goals. WeCycle had a similar experience and calculated average gross earnings of approximately \$10 per hour, which is below minimum wage and does not account for operational expenses such as bicycle maintenance.

TSD and WeCycle looked into increasing the delivery fee to cover the true cost of the service. However, 80% of customers surveyed indicated that they were not willing to pay a higher price of \$12 (which would be close to break-even) instead of \$5 (or free when a minimum order is reached) for delivery. TSD and WeCycle have discontinued deliveries to assess how it can be implemented in a more financially and environmentally sustainable way.

“We are very grateful that we have been able to stay open, keep our staff, keep buying from our suppliers, and... providing as much low waste products to our customers as possible.”

The health and safety of staff is a high priority for TSD. Taking into consideration the risks their staff were making by continuing to work, TSD decided to give all of their staff a raise. Many small businesses are having difficulty retaining or maintaining staff due to safety concerns of working during a pandemic. Raising staff wages may not have been sustainable short-term due to the financial stress already placed on the store but the owner still chose to do it. Mostly, because “it felt like the right thing to do.”



Tips for Success

TSD made many changes to their business model to sustain revenue and low waste goals during the COVID-19 pandemic. This created a number of learning opportunities and lessons for the business that they took away as important factors in their successful transition through the pandemic.

Go Online Using Free Tools

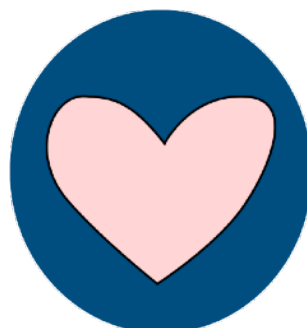
TSD's owner jokingly mentioned "I actually had a sign on my website that said, 'online store coming soon', and that was posted...three years ago." COVID-19 pushed TSD into the online marketplace to maintain sales and keep the doors open, and now they are embracing what will most likely be a permanent feature of the business. The online platform worked for them because they created it within the framework of their core values. "We're kind of embracing the online model...And we don't have to subscribe to the Amazon model." TSD used simple online tools such as JotForm and Google sheets for their online ordering system. Rather than subscribing to a full e-commerce platform, this approach allowed TSD to pivot quickly and reduce upfront costs for setting up an online store. By modelling the online ordering system after how they process in-store orders, staff can follow the same procedures and customers have a sense of familiarity when placing their orders.



"If you told me six months ago, 'you're going to do this', I wouldn't have believed you."

Remember Your Core Values

For TSD, maintaining their core values didn't mean that there were no compromises made, but that compromises were made only when necessary and always with the support of staff. The store implemented more safety measures such as having staff wear disposable gloves even though it meant that more waste was created. "I had to just be ok with that... because safety did come first." The use of glass deposit jars was another necessary compromise. While refilling customers' own containers is considered the lowest waste option, the glass deposit jars and paper bags were better than single-use containers. "We are using more energy, more water, stickers, and things like that. But at least everything is reusable and that's still within our framework." TSD also emphasized that other small businesses need not totally compromise their values but find creative and innovative ways to work through their challenges.



"You know, even during COVID or during any crisis you still have to remember why you're operating."

Engage With Staff

TSD made effective changes quickly by consulting staff regularly. TSD believes this is one reason they were able to quickly manoeuvre to an online platform and make day-to-day changes to keep the store running smoothly while regulations changed. "[TSD staff] also came up with very innovative ideas because they are on the front line and they are going through these protocols and processes and interacting with customers, so they could see what they needed." Staff engagement, in conjunction with keeping up to date on health authority guidelines and news, was crucial to how TSD shaped their store policies to create a system that worked for their business staying ahead of evolving changes from the COVID-19 pandemic.



"[It was an] incredible time to check in everyday to see how they were feeling and get their feedback."