

Quidditas Health and Wellness



During the early wave of COVID-19, small local businesses faced high uncertainty about whether they would remain open during the pandemic. Retail stores selling food and household consumer products were considered essential by the British Columbia government and allowed to remain open¹. Small retailers overcame many challenges as they adapted to evolving government regulations and continue to face uncertainty as we head into a second wave of outbreaks. Quidditas Health and Wellness is a small health and wellness store located on Commercial Drive in Vancouver that illustrates the resilience and importance of local businesses as they adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Quidditas provides soaps, bulk herbs, and a variety of vitamins and minerals to promote health and wellbeing to their customers. In addition to providing popular wellness items the shop also stocks a variety of homeopathic remedies and tinctures to support immune system health. Quidditas has been open since 2002 and is owned and operated by Tran Tran and a small staff team. They are open 7 days a week to provide quality goods and services to the local community.

Sustainability Goals

Bulk Products

The store offers many different options for customers who are interested in decreasing their packaging use and contributing to sustainable practices; one example is by selling herbs and soaps in bulk. Customers can bring in their own containers, tare the weight, and then refill the products themselves and bring them to the counter to pay. This refill system using containers from home limits additional packaging that would be used to contain each customer's order. This approach supports cost saving bulk purchases for both the store and customers. Another way the bulk herb refill contributes to sustainability is by sourcing herbs that are local to reduce transportation-related carbon emissions (where possible) and organically grown without pesticides, which can degrade both environmental and human health.

¹ Emergency Management BC (EMBC), & Government Communications and Public Engagement (GCPE). (2020, June 12). List of COVID-19 Essential Services. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/emergency-preparedness-response-recovery/covid-19-provincial-support/essential-services-covid-19>



Reducing Plastic Bag Use

Another way the store is working towards sustainability goals is to limit plastic bag usage. Instead of offering plastic bags to carry out products the store encourages the use of reusable bags and opts for compostable plastic bags. They also reuse packing paper and bubble wrap to wrap products for customers. At the time of the interview, the store was testing compostable plastic bags made from cassava root as well as another bag labelled 'biodegradable'. Tran is actively working to determine the environmental impact of each type of bag. There can be limited information available for the energy and material consumption used to create each bag, how to compare and determine standards for what bags are considered compostable versus biodegradable (or oxo-biodegradable, which means plastic breaks into smaller pieces but is not compostable). Overall making the choice of a 'best option' can be difficult when attempting to assess sustainability of an item from a life cycle assessment point of view. The store tries to "look into sort of the cost of making it, the cost of transporting" and whether that affects the sustainability of the product, in order to make the best possible decision. The store has opted for the cassava option instead of using paper bags since they hold more. On one hand the paper bags don't hold as much volume so they would be using twice as many bags to carry out the same products. On another hand, it's hard to determine whether switching to paper bags would be more or less sustainable in terms of energy, material inputs, and sustainable end of life management options.

Social and Cultural Sustainability

Tran also recognized the importance of addressing social and cultural sustainability locally and abroad. One way Tran contributes to an important cause for them is to sponsor an animal shelter in Vietnam that takes in stray cats and dogs that were either abandoned at veterinary offices or found in the street. This contribution is important to Tran, who would normally also make a trip twice a year to see how the shelter is running. This year she hasn't been able to make the trip. On these trips home, she also takes time to find specialty items like crystals that are sold in the shop.

Challenges from COVID-19

Store Capacity and Staff Morale

Since the store is primarily a grocery and wellness shop, it was considered an essential service and able to stay open through the pandemic. They still faced many physical challenges while staying open. For small stores in particular it has been challenging to implement many of the safety protocols put forth by the government because of limited store capacity. Many simply do not have the physical space to accommodate many people in the store while still following social distancing. For Quidditas this means “the capacity that [the store can] not [have] many people in the store at the same time.” While most people are respectful of social distancing and other new rules, some customers have had more difficulty adapting to the changes. One challenge has been for staff to maintain a positive attitude even when customers become agitated or aggressive because of their opposition to changes in store policy, whether it be limiting customer numbers or not being able to allow self-serve refills. This negativity can affect the staff working and Tran has noticed that staff wellbeing has gone through periods of decline during the pandemic. The anxiety and frustration of customers can “actually affect [the staff’s] mental health as well.”

Changes to Bulk and Refill Products

It has been challenging to shift away from having customers use their own refill containers. Instead of being able to bring their own container and refill herbs themselves, the store now has a staff member who will fill the bulk herbs into bags for the customer. This minimizes the amount of people touching surfaces and decreases risk of germ spread on high touch points. Customers are still allowed to bring containers to refill soap but only if the container is completely empty and clean. The store has sanitizer available for customers who want to fill soap and they must sanitize if they are touching any fill equipment.

Remaining open has been beneficial for the store. Since the start of the pandemic they maintained fairly steady sales. Staffing has been a challenge because those with cold or flu symptoms have to stay home until they can ensure they cannot pass any illness on to others whether it may be COVID-19 or a simple cold. With the increase in staff involvement in refilling bulk items the store also has to have more staff on hand at any given time. This ensures customers can be helped efficiently to limit their time in the store. Continuing refills means that more staff are necessary because otherwise “especially when it’s busy [refilling herbs] can just slow us down.”



Supply Chain Disruptions

Other challenges with COVID-19 have been supply chain and restock issues. Many businesses have had challenges with supply chain bottlenecks, product shortage, and production stoppages since the pandemic began. Supply availability is particularly challenging for small stores that sell specialty items available from only one or two companies. Some production companies have limited the range of products they are manufacturing, and others are experiencing shortages due to difficulty shipping in ingredients. These problems all trickle down to small businesses who are left with empty spots on shelves where they are unable to get certain products – or receive them only after considerable delay.

Benefits of COVID-19



COVID-19 has presented some benefits and learning opportunities. At Quidditas, they have noticed that they are better able to track what customers are purchasing and interested in. They have had more time to communicate with customers and see what products they may want to have available. They have also noticed a decrease in stolen items. Tran attributes this to social distancing protocols that include limiting the number of people in the store at one time, which means staff can more easily notice if customers are trying to steal anything. There is also generally less loitering in the store so that everybody gets a fair chance to shop. Moving customers along leads to a more efficient shopping experience for those who appreciate being able to come in and quickly get what they need.

Another benefit has been increased communication with customers about different wellness products, homeopathic remedies, and practices to keep immune systems strong. One popular discussion with customers is how to reduce stress through wellness activities and natural remedies. Being able to relieve stress may be key in the current climate due to the increased rates of stress people are experiencing. Helping customers leave the store with a positive attitude about wellness strategies has been key for Quidditas to connect to their customer base. Redirecting the negative energy surrounding COVID-19 rules and restrictions is beneficial to people being able to live more balanced lives and could engage more customers with wellness practices than before.

Recommendations for Government Action to Support Long-Term Health

A consistent challenge that small businesses are facing during this pandemic is increased uncertainty both for staff and customers. With rapidly changing information from multiple levels of government, it can be hard for people to keep track of what information is correct, what rules apply to them, and how to follow those rules. Quidditas is one of many small businesses that has been overcoming challenges related to uncertainty and maintaining a sustainable business during COVID-19. They suggest that government could present more proactive information about supporting your immune system to minimize the effects of COVID-19 and prioritize research into COVID-19 effects on health in the medium and long term. Governments could also advocate for immune boosting activities such as healthy eating and physical exercise and promote ways to reduce the risks associated with serious COVID-19 cases. In addition to information about physical distancing, rules and regulations, which can often be received in a negative light, Tran recommends that positive information about taking care of yourself and others could balance the information load put forth by the government. Besides public health measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, it is also important to make sure people have basic information about taking care of their immune system with “vitamins, minerals, sleep well, stress and then just hygiene.” Overall this may contribute to a more balanced approach to health and wellbeing than the current information regime offers.