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Export date: Thu Mar 28 9:26:18 2024 / +0000 GMT

Strategies for fighting back

March 23, 2020

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The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs is using a series of webinars to help fight off the negative impact of COVID-19. Locally, the Bancroft Business Improvement Area shared this information through a post on social media on March 18. Some of the suggestions in the webinar relate directly to those in the tourism business, while others were more applicable to downtown retail. In all, the message was that it is not a forgone conclusion that your business will fail. Steps can be taken to help keep your business afloat. One of the recommendations included in the webinar was to encourage people to do day trips and outdoor activities as they can be done while still maintaining social distancing. This suggestion, promoting a ?get away from it all? is good for areas where trails, rivers for canoeing etc. are abundant. Physical activity is not only healthy for the body but also the mind. It suggests making sure visitors know what is open and what is not. Update your website daily with this information so people do not come and be disappointed. While visitor centres and museums might be closed, in some cases, parks may still open, although provincial parks are currently closed. For downtown retailers, strategies include creating a gift card promotion campaign. People can order a gift card online for your business now and then use it later when things are open. In Cornwall, one individual set up an online gift certificate program that could be redeemed later and nearly 100 businesses signed up in a few hours. This means the business will still have cash flow even though they still have to deliver the products later. This is a place where a local community can really step up to help keep small businesses going. Shop over the phone, put an item on hold and pick it up later, shop online, leave a positive review on the store's Facebook page or on Trip Advisor, promote a local establishment on social media and maintain any subscriptions you already have. These are all ways the community can get behind a local business. Consider a small business before the big ones. Small business owners may have to venture into services they have never offered before. This may include offering delivery of their product, whether it is meals from a restaurant or other kinds of products. It is recommended that business owners check with their insurer before having their employees switch over to delivering products to make sure they will be covered. Another important recommendation is to have all your key information right on your home page about change in services and new services. One strategy that seems to be working for some businesses is to offer phone or online ordering with pic-up times. The purchaser texts to the shop when they arrive with their name and model and colour of car and someone will bring it out to you. Facebook is suggested as a great way to interact with local customers. If a business owner has not delved into social media for their business, maybe this is time to do so. Post once a week, twice at most. For accommodators, posting the process for fumigating and wiping down your rooms on your website, is important. Arrest people's fears. It is suggested to never discount rates to fill rooms. People are not coming because of your prices but because they fear illness. If people have to cancel during this period of uncertainty, do not charge them a fee. That way they will remember you when times improve. For those organizing large gatherings or events, it is suggested that postponements be in 30-day increments. Saying an event is postponed indefinitely is not a good way to go as things may turn around and people may think it is still not happening. For those small meetings there are a variety of ways to do virtual meetings or conferences by using such things such as Zoom or GoToMeeting, etc. The important thing is to keep attendees up to date weekly with what is happening. Over the coming weeks there are likely to be a variety of government assistance programs introduced. Keeping track of changes in your sales, staffing etc., may be important in applying for such funds. In the interim, this may be a good time to do a deep cleaning of your business, reorganize displays, develop a new marketing strategy that includes different ways of doing business and get ready for a celebratory grand opening when this difficult time is in the past.