

Reinvention in the Age of Covid 19

When I was initially asked what I thought was the silver lining of the Covid19 crisis, at least with respect to our industry, I went blank. In my 25 years in nightlife, I, along with many of you, have witnessed the impact of terrorist attacks, financial meltdowns, zoning battles, catastrophic lawsuits and assorted police actions. One of my company's specialties is "crisis management," after all, which means I not only prepare to navigate disaster; I go out and *look* for it. But by St. Patrick's Day 2020, every single club I represented was closed--no action plan, no press spin, no public hearing, no notice to cure. Since then a few have reopened to a degree, some have not, some have reopened and subsequently closed, with no real end to the cycle in sight. So, when friends came to me with this silver lining talk, my first thought was, seriously? F*** you.

However, as someone famous should have said, you can't just walk around drooling all day, so the question becomes, how do we utilize this unwelcome "reboot," as the publisher of this magazine recently referred to it. Do we seize this moment to reinvent ourselves, or do we use the pandemic as an excuse not to do the things we did badly in the first place, whether it be marketing, staffing, beverage programming or customer service? We're all about to find out how essential, or not, our "nonessential" businesses are—how many entertainers and employees actually rely on us to support themselves and their families, and how many guests prefer an actual human interaction to free internet porn, when the balance is tipped even further in favor of the latter. It's a scary proposition, like looking in the mirror the morning after a bender. To that end, here are my best tips for surviving the Covid

crisis and coming out stronger on the other side.

Get Addicted to Rehab

How many of you used shut down as an opportunity to deep clean, tend to overdue repairs or embark on more extensive renovations? This isn't the moment to break the bank, but slapping on fresh paint, refinishing your stage, steam-cleaning chairs, reorganizing inventory and labeling supplies doesn't burn much cash. I helped one of my more ambitious clients use epoxy to add branding and shine to their bars and tables—transforming the mid-sized club for less than a thousand dollars—and added sexy silhouettes to the bathrooms and hallways as conversation starters. Even Covid-related modifications can showcase creativity—think witty social distancing signage, personalized floor markers, jpegs and videos on the televisions to replace tabletop menus, and even plexiglass stage barriers reminiscent of old school peep shows. For those of you who are still closed due to rollbacks or business classifications, or operating on a limited schedule, it's not too late to get addicted to rehab! But the takeaway for us all is to not get so caught up in the day-to-day that we forget to keep a rainy day fund and continue to improve our venues, so guests have a compelling reason to come back to us, during Covid and beyond.

Marketing—A Failure to Communicate

Those of you who still believe you can't collect emails, cell numbers or social profiles from your guests, we need you to take a fistful of aspirin and get over it. The

reason is that digital and social marketing is all we really have right now, so it's as good a time as any to sharpen our skills.

- Even if you're still closed, post frequently on social media to stay present on your followers' timelines—and minds.
- Strapped for content? Ask your staff and entertainers to send you sexy selfies or cute videos from quarantine. If you've already developed a good rapport with your girls and sold them on the benefits of self-promotion, this step is a no brainer. You can also post renovation pics and recycle old content with new copy.
- Yes, it's ok to reference, or even joke, about the virus in your posts, such as, "We want to flatten the curve, but we can't wait to see Stacie's!" Most people who follow an adult club online aren't easily offended, but you never know if someone's been personally affected, so keep the message positive and light, and for the love of everything, keep your politics out of it.
- Use email and/or text messaging to update your database on opening status, hours, specials and other information. Guests won't come out if there's too much uncertainty surrounding the club-going experience. Are they open? Will there be dancers? What are the rules? Is it going to suck? If you're operating according to guidance, it's best to paint a clear picture and manage expectations. If you're operating in the gray, showcase things like new renovations, signature dishes, smiling staff ... If you're afraid to promote because you're not really supposed to be

open, please close back down before you get the rest of us in trouble.

- Update your hours on Google, Facebook and Yelp as necessary; all of these platforms have specific sections for Covid-related information, so there is NO excuse to not do this. Build trust between you and prospective guests by maintaining a correct online presence—it shows you give a shit. Besides, nothing is worse than getting all worked up to see titties and traveling across town, only to find the club dark. (Ok, there are *much* worse things, but you get the point.)

Don't be afraid to promote for fear of attracting too much business and straining capacity. Too much business is rich-people-problems right now. Follow your states guidance, and if you can't admit everyone who comes to the door, give them a pass to come back later and hope they tell the world about it.

The Value Proposition

Has anyone noticed a dearth of happy hours, daily specials, and promotions among the restaurants and bars in their markets? The mainstream thinking is that right now, restaurants need to watch their margins, and if they're operating under occupancy restrictions, they need to maximize PPA; goals which aren't conducive to happy hour deals. But I'm going to make the argument that gentlemen's clubs adhere to a different model and need to rely on our own thinking. Unlike restaurants, we generally don't need to operate at capacity to be profitable; a handful of guests often account for the lion's share of revenue. And if you're among the collection of operators who analyze cost, awesome job, but you're in the minority. I will never advocate ignorance, but I want to

point out that our industry provides revenue streams restaurants don't have—admission, house fees, dance revenue, VIP rooms—which have little cost against them and buy you wiggle room on F&B. The moral? Use that wiggle room to offer your guests value in the form of drink or dinner specials—anything to provide guests with a reason to seek an interpersonal experience, at a time when those experiences feel fraught with risk.

- DO offer intelligent specials that speak to the clientele you WANT (which may be different than the clientele you have).
- DON'T offer specials and forget to promote them—the idea is to drive additional bodies, not give discounts to people who would have come regardless.

And remember, we can't have margins if we don't have business.

Embrace the Tech

Surviving in the age of Covid has underscored the need to embrace technology, whether it be through virtual waivers, digital menus and signage or touchless payment solutions. I'm not here to say that these solutions will or will not save the world from this virus, but getting in touch with tech is something that benefits us as a whole, so perhaps this is the nudge we need. If you're old-school, don't despair; you have a DJ, IT manager, administrative executive, or other staff member who is tech savvy—use her.

This crisis is different than crises past because it feels like we control nothing, including how we operate—or if. But I will argue that what we do now matters more than ever and proves, or not, our viability as industry. We've been faced for some time

with the need to evolve, and quickly, but the virus has served to magnify our weaknesses and forced us to confront them, to marshal our collective creativity and resourcefulness to do better.

The silver lining is us.

