

CULINARY DISTANCING COS BACKGROUND

OVERVIEW: Culinary Distancing COS is a community Facebook group dedicated to supporting the local food and drink industry in Colorado Springs, Colorado and uplifting struggling businesses and owners during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. The group of 8,500 highly engaged members connects food- and drink-lovers to business owners and industry professionals, increasing customer understanding of industry challenges and perspectives while providing owners a space to build relationships with and glean insights from potential customers. A Social Return on Investment (SROI)* Study conducted by Colorado Institute for Social Impact determined that the total contributions of the volunteer-run group toward strengthening the community in 2020 were nearly \$1.1 million.

* SROI is the measurement, in a language of dollars and cents, of the value of an organization's efforts to alleviate a social, environmental or community issues.

HISTORY: In early March 2020, as major cities around the United States began issuing shut down orders due to the COVID-19 pandemic, two Colorado Springs residents – Matthew Schniper, Food and Drink Editor for the Colorado Springs Independent, and Lauren Hug, a digital and community engagement strategist, started brainstorming quick and easy ways to help the local restaurant industry survive the restrictions that seemed imminent. On March 15, 2020, a day before the first Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) order temporarily closing bars and restaurants was issued and two days before it took effect, they launched Culinary Distancing COS. The group grew rapidly, attracting a combination of customers and industry professionals.

UNIQUE ATTRIBUTES:

- Community-centric response to pandemic-related challenges faced by a specific group of businesses led by a combination of subject matter expertise and community engagement/facilitation.
- Intentionally supportive of local food and drink businesses. No criticism or bashing of businesses allowed. Eighty-eight percent of members joined specifically to support struggling businesses, which sets the group apart from other food groups focused more on the patron/consumer experience.
- Emphasis on positivity. The group's intent is to bring people together over shared love of local food and drink industry. It's a gathering place for shared enthusiasm and experiences. Posts that focus on division are routinely removed.
- Connection between food and drink business owners and the people who appreciate their services. Most members of Culinary Distancing COS see their interactions with businesses as a two-way relationship. They are more than consumers – they are partners in helping businesses survive, thrive, and keep their employees, customers, and community safe.
- The Social Return on Investment Study conducted on the group by Colorado Institute for Social Impact is the first SROI Study on a pandemic business solution. That, along with a survey of nearly 400 members and 50 businesses, provides fascinating insights into the impact of digital community groups and connections between business owners and the community their businesses serve.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR BUSINESSES: Prioritize content and activities that foster connection over transactions. Vulnerability creates connection and understanding with existing and potential customers. It turns "customers" into "partners" with a personal stake in supporting the business. Invest in ways of incentivizing and equipping people (customers, employees, vendors, other businesses etc.) to create content about the business.