In early March 2020, as major cities around the United States began issuing shutdown orders due to the COVID-19 pandemic, two Colorado Springs residents (Matthew Schniper, Food and Drink Editor at the Colorado Springs Independent, and Lauren Hug, a community strategist) brainstormed fast ways to help the local restaurant industry survive restrictions. 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, they launched Culinary Distancing COS, a community Facebook group.

The group was conceived as a safe, uplifting digital space to show community support for an industry that was struggling, and connect food- and drink-loving community members to one another. It grew rapidly and sustained a high level of engagement as group members connected and collaborated in exciting and innovative ways. Businesses actively participated in the group as well, communicating with members about the changes they were making regarding public safety, struggles they were facing, what they needed to survive and thrive, and asking how to best serve customers.

Other organizations have sought to replicate the success of the group, so surveys of group members and business owners were undertaken to better understand what makes community groups thrive and how businesses can leverage them (and findings from them) to recover and thrive.

The funding for this project was made possible by the Pikes Peak Regional Retail and Hospitality Sector Partnership, convened by the Pikes Peak Workforce Center. The funding originates through Lives Empowered, an initiative to bring together retail businesses interested in working collaboratively to increase economic mobility for frontline workers across Colorado and contribute to a strong economy. Lives Empowered is made possible by a $4.1 million grant from Walmart to the Colorado Workforce Development Council.
METHODOLOGY

- Online survey of nearly 400 group members invited via posts in the Facebook group and conducted from mid-December 2020 to mid-January 2021.
  - At the time of the survey, based on Facebook metrics, the group had roughly 8,300 members. 82% were located in Colorado Springs and 11% were located in other surrounding areas (2% each from Monument, Fountain and Fort Carson, as well as several from Manitou Springs, Falcon, Black Forest, Peyton, Palmer Lake, Woodland Park, Security, Calhan, Ellicott, Green Mountain Falls, and Larkspur). The remaining 7% were located primarily in Colorado, with only a handful of members hailing from outside of the State.
  - 90% of members were actively engaged in the group based on the same metrics.

- Online survey of 50 restaurant owners invited via posts in the Facebook group and conducted from mid-December 2020 to mid-January 2021.

KEY FINDINGS

- Relatively loose rules regarding membership (actual humans with ties to the community) and posting (positive and supportive of local food and drink businesses) allow for wide-ranging and dynamic interactions resulting in cross-pollination and broadly crowdsourced solutions. Every post could be a springboard for discovery of new businesses and/or “must-try” items, business owner collaboration, group member action, recommendations, market research, awareness, understanding, connection, and empathy.

- Subject matter expertise (industry credibility and connections via Food and Drink Editor) plus community facilitation expertise (via credibility and connections of a community strategist) created a digital space that was both curated and conversational.

- Human content is more compelling than business content. Stories are more compelling than specials. Connection-based content is more compelling than transaction-based content.

- Participation in a single, active community group can be enough to keep some businesses afloat.

- The group format allows for nimble response to rapidly-changing conditions.
Because of Culinary Distancing COS

**Group Members**
- 99% are more informed about local food and drink industry
- 89% feel more invested in our local food and drink community; 25% of those say they’d do whatever they can to help that community survive
- 85% support different restaurants now than they did before joining Culinary Distancing COS
- 58% discovered a food or drink business that has now become one of their favorites
- 53% either have or intend to support a BIPOC-owned business; 47% either have or intend to support a woman-owned business; 43% either have or intend to support a veteran-owned business

**Food & Drink Business Owners**
- More than three-fourths say the group has been helpful to their business during the pandemic
- More than three-fourths say the group positively impacted them emotionally
- Almost two-thirds say the group helped their business financially
- Almost half say the group helped them pivot or adapt their business to survive and/or thrive
- Nearly one-third say the group has changed the way they will market their business (and responses to open-ended questions indicate several business owners found new ways to market through group interaction)
GROUP MEMBERS

I find the group inspiring. I think the creation of the group helped some businesses survive since it created an avenue of constant awareness and chain reactions. I hope the support of locally owned businesses over chains continues post-pandemic. This group’s continued efforts can help make that happen.

This group reminds me that we all care about our local economy and want to help it survive. With a little bit of information we can make better decisions.

BUSINESS OWNERS

I would not be in business if it was not started. That is the thing that started the ball moving.

The community that has been built has been quite impressive. I don’t see that disappearing after the pandemic.

Great group members, great admins, great reviews and suggestions, and a great place to market my business!

I have seen some cool stories where the support the page created has positively impacted a business and this makes me feel happy.
WHY PEOPLE JOIN: The group was created to support local food and drink businesses and 88% joined for that purpose, setting it apart from other local food-related groups focused on patron perspectives rather than business perspectives.

BRINGING OTHERS IN: Nearly two-thirds (64%) invited at least one person to join the group; 7% invited 11 or more people. Nearly 20% say they joined because someone invited them.

HIGH ENGAGEMENT: Roughly one-third engage with the group on a daily basis, with 6% engaging several times a day. Roughly one-third engage several times a week. A quarter engage on a weekly basis. 99% say they are likely to continue participating post-pandemic.

WHAT PEOPLE LIKE MOST: Discovering new-to-me food and drink businesses (83%), supporting local food and drink businesses (80%), being part of a local food- and drink-loving community (58%).
Businesses surveyed included a geographically diverse cross-section of our food and drink community: restaurants, bars, coffee shops, breweries/distilleries, food-related retail, food trucks, caterers, and cooking schools.

Most had been in business for a year or more. Some had been in business for over 20 years. A few started their business right before the pandemic began, and a few started during the pandemic.

The majority of owners reported either that business was down or they weren’t sure they would survive. Several said it was business as usual, while some said business was better than ever.

Most businesses applied for and received PPP loans or other sources of funding, though a few applied for and did not receive funding. Several businesses didn’t apply for any funding.
GROUP MEMBERS

Most people in the group very much want to support struggling businesses and share their love of food and drink.

This group has allowed me to venture out of my ‘bubble’ to support small businesses when they need it more than ever.

We all need an easy place to find who we can support, as quickly as possible when things change so frequently. I think it’s a great tool, especially when owners are highly engaged.

I joined to try to support my community, but gained even more appreciation with posts about owners, particularly how to support restaurants owned by women and BIPOC.

BUSINESS OWNERS

By learning so many people saw restaurants as vital businesses to support and protect, I realized we were not alone. My impulse to give back to the community and those in need was reciprocated many times over.

The care and concern and the way the members of this group come together to support one another has been amazing!
THE GROUP: WAYS OF PARTICIPATING

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION
- 31% posted pictures and/or descriptions of their experiences with food/drink businesses
- 26% asked for recommendations
- 23% shared content from food and drink businesses to the group

RESPONSIVE PARTICIPATION
- 56% made recommendations and/or answered questions from other group members
- 42% shared group content in other places
- 29% engaged with and/or provided feedback to businesses

PASSIVE PARTICIPATION
- 85% discovered new-to-me food and drink places
- 61% used group-generated lists to inform their decisions
- 40% learned things about the food and drink industry they hadn’t known before

Far more members consume or respond to content than create it. That means those who create content exert significant influence over those who consume it.
The majority of businesses owners participated by posting their own business specials.

Most of them also participated as general members, discovering new food and drink businesses and sharing content from businesses other than their own.

Less than half told their business story.

Only a quarter used the group as an opportunity to conduct market research and/or explain a business perspective to the general public.

Posts by owners about OTHER businesses were likely more effective than posts about their OWN business. Content created by group members was 32% more appealing than content created by businesses.

**TAKEAWAY:** Business owners should collaborate to talk about each other on social media.

40% of members participated by learning about the food/drink industry. Interacting with business owners was the thing liked MOST by 24% of members.

**TAKEAWAY:** Storytelling and interaction is more effective than traditional marketing posts.
GROUP MEMBERS

We try to share our experiences to encourage others to keep supporting local food and drink!

Sharing recommendations of my favorite local joints and learning about new spots has been awesome.

Seeing the struggles of local restaurant and bar owners and how many have adapted has been eye-opening and inspires me to support local as often as possible.

BUSINESS OWNERS

We always share the various ways in which we have strived to meet the highest standards of every element of new mandates. The group appreciated the effort to be up to the moment in all of the changing facets of mitigation.

My cinnamon roll post was shared to the group. I got quite a few orders from it!

I’m able to post new menu items and reach a lot of potential new customers.

I see a lot of people who are involved in the business, who have good ideas for support, and cross-referencing customers for each other.
77% of group members find visual and storytelling content about food/drink experiences created by other members to be appealing.

67% like recommendations and lists created by group members.

66% like personal posts by food/drink business owners.

58% like promotional posts from businesses.

Yet only 19% say they like sharing their own food/drink experiences, and only 31% of group members posted visual or storytelling content about their experiences. Business owners also found non-promotional content from other owners appealing.

TAKEAWAY: Once again demonstrating that those who create content exert significant influence over those who consume it.

NOTE: Visual and storytelling content created by group members was 32% more appealing than promotional posts from businesses; 17% more than personal posts from owners; and 15% more than group-generated lists and recommendations.
GROUP MEMBERS

When people share pictures of their food I’m far more likely to buy it. Plus if people are posting about it, it’s good enough for me to order it too.

Love learning about businesses that have adapted via family meals, cooking classes, in house delivery, etc.

I love seeing the locally-owned options that I didn’t even know existed!

BUSINESS OWNERS

A great outlet to not only see what people are looking for but also to see what others are doing.

As a business owner, it is nice to see what is trending on the page. As an independent viewer, I can use it to help decide what is for dinner.

Makes us aware of what others are doing to survive, giving us insight into what paths make the best sense.
OUTCOMES: CONNECTION

- 93% of group members feel more connected to the broader community because of Culinary Distancing COS.
- More than two-thirds of owners say their Culinary Distancing COS experience changed the way they look at community; their comments indicate they especially appreciated the camaraderie with other business owners.

A group member posted about spending part of her first stimulus check on meals to take to Evans Hospital at Fort Carson. Group members and restaurants offered to help with her efforts, restaurant owners vouched for the quality of other restaurants, a bakery offered to provide gluten-free goods. The original poster asked how business is going and the bakery replied that it needed access to a commercial kitchen because of the shutdown. Another local restaurant jumped in to offer the use of their commercial kitchen to the bakery.

Group members offered to take Thanksgiving meals to a member looking for single-portion takeout options since she would be celebrating the holiday alone. Other folks celebrating alone connected over their shared experience.

When group members asked for recommendations about celebrating special occasions during the shutdown and decreased capacity, several restaurant owners jumped in offering various ways to make the occasion special (ie, free bottle of wine, free dessert, special packing, etc.)

Restaurateurs explained to community members the realities of their industry, resulting in behavior change by customers. For example, learning that delivery services take 20-30% commission resulted in community members choosing to pick up at restaurants directly.

A temporarily closed coffee shop/restaurant offered to open up to make a special take out Passover meal early in the first shutdown.
A member turned to the group for instructions on how to prepare an Easter meal kit from a local restaurant.

Another member provided photos of the requested instructions.

More members asked for instructions on other aspects of the kit.

The restaurant owner thanked members for helping out and for supporting the restaurant.
GROUP MEMBERS

It’s been interesting to interact with other community members - even if it started surrounding food, because it seemed to often lead elsewhere (friendship, hope, encouragement).

Being a bit older and taking precautions, this group has been a great way to stay informed and connected.

BUSINESS OWNERS

The awareness that this page helped us to create resulted in an excellent year. It also helped us to connect with people who invited us to serve in their neighborhoods which was a huge but profitable shift in our business model.

It has helped introduce me to other business owners and feel connected with other business owners. Helps to know others are going through exactly the same challenges, and see others’ successes.

The business community feels much more connected to me than it was before. To know we aren't alone and the support of the community is wonderful.
OUTCOMES: COLLABORATION

Group members collaborated to devise unique ways of supporting food and drink businesses:

- Coordinating to place bulk orders from restaurants and businesses, allowing them to manage their inventory. One neighborhood placed an order for 18 meals within the first week of the Stay-at-Home order; later in the pandemic a member coordinated at least 18 dozen orders of specialty pastries from a bakery.

- Asking food trucks how many meals needed to be sold to make it profitable to come out to a neighborhood.

- Restaurant owners bartering with excess inventory and crowdsourcing places to donate excess food.

- Brainstorming protocols to notify delivery drivers about how to conduct contactless deliveries. Group members posted signs to print out and shared the experiences of delivery drivers to help identify effective ways of communicating.

- Crowdsourcing answers to specific inquiries: helping each other find everything from 50lb bags of sugar to banana cream pies to meatball subs to vegan delivery options to a birthday cheesecake (which included offers from group members to bake one).

- Group-generated, populated, and maintained spreadsheets and lists of restaurants open for pickup and delivery (early in the pandemic), serving family-style meals, Black-owned, offering outdoor dining, etc.
A post about a bad curbside pickup experience (without naming the restaurant) led to:

- a lively discussion about restaurants doing a great job with pickup
- how best to communicate with restaurants not meeting safety expectations
- collaboration among group members about safety protocols they’d like to see restaurants following, as well as ways they agree to help restaurants follow those protocols, resulting in a Safe Food/Drink Take Out and Delivery teamwork one-pager. (Long before clear safety guidelines had been issued by official entities.)
All restaurants had to adapt to changing pandemic conditions. The group connected restaurants with a critical mass of engaged community members to assess market needs/wants.

- “We decided to focus on the people who respected science and made sacrifices for the community and the greater good. In doing this we focused on those we wanted to support and who then supported us. This lead us to realize we can be leaders and market to like-minded patrons without worrying about the others who may resist the science.” – an owner

- Group members asked businesses to provide things they wanted to buy, like family meals and DIY meal kits; businesses asked members for details on what they were looking for and for feedback on products/services they were considering offering (like front door cocktail service).

- Owners looked to each other for ideas about how to survive and thrive.
- Group members tried new-to-them businesses and activities.
A group member suggested that cookware stores partner with restaurants to sell food + cooking equipment or cooking equipment + cooking lessons.

- Cookware stores, cooking schools, and restaurants jumped in to discuss potential collaborations.
- Community members said they love the idea and talked about pairings they’d like to see.
- A representative from Downtown Partnership offered to promote downtown pairings on downtown channels.
- SparrowHawk Cookware and Streetcar 520 offered a cocktail and glassware pairing. SparrowHawk sold out of the glassware.
- Group members amplified the initiative by talking about their SparrowHawk/Streetcar 520 purchases.
BUSINESS OWNERS

It has opened up different ways to serve the community that I wouldn't have thought of before.

We have seen things other businesses are doing and tried some of them.

Watching what other business owners are doing is helping me formulate my plans.

Helped with trends: when to stop delivering, when to create new things, what to charge.

It is nice to hear and read about other businesses that are dealing with similar struggles and sometimes finding new ways to handle similar problems.

GROUP MEMBERS

I finally got the nerve to take an online cooking class after watching others post about it. Now I'm hooked.

We struggle trying to find new places and get out of our neighborhood. This group had been great in introducing us to new options.
OUTCOMES: AMPLIFICATION

Group members support local food and drink businesses by sharing recent food and drink experiences, asking each other for recommendations, and telling positive stories about the restaurants they are supporting. This amplifies the products and services businesses provide, creates buzz, and leads to new customers.

- I’ve heard about more businesses that need support and have been prepared to branch out and drive further afield to visit places.
- Because of this group, we have found many smaller restaurants and small at-home (cottage) food preparers around the area.
- I’ve learned about restaurants and bars that I had no idea even existed before the pandemic. It’s been a great way to learn more about our community and how to support them in a difficult time.
- Learned about a lot of smaller restaurants that we want to try, especially downtown.
- Awareness of our business in all of its modifications was amplified through the group and reinforced constantly.
Two weeks into the first shutdown, Mark Bryant, owner of Mark Anthony’s Pretzel’s, posted in the group offering the pretzels he normally sold to now-struggling restaurants direct to the community.

- The post was shared 6 times from the group, and garnered 55 comments, with Mark communicating with community members about his business and why he was selling pretzels retail now.

- According to a comment by Mark, he expected 6 or 7 orders, but received 50.

- His pretzels continued to be hugely popular within the group (and beyond). He eventually expanded his retail business by hiring additional help and moving into a retail space.
OUTCOMES: RESILIENCE & RECOVERY

**GROUP MEMBERS**
- When the pandemic started, I felt helpless. This group made me feel like I was doing something to help.
- It’s been important to know how we can help and who needs a little extra support. Feels good to respond.
- I enjoy seeing people connecting and sharing positivity when everything else in the world is just so, so bleak. This reminds me that we’re all in this together.
- Contributing to and engaging with the site felt like something positive I could do to support my local community.
- I have felt a little useless when I see how restaurants have been impacted by Covid. The group gives me a sense that I can do SOMETHING.
- I’m proud to see the community pulling together during pandemic.

**BUSINESS OWNERS**
- It can easily seem like we’re being forgotten and then someone will post something about one of our restaurants and it helps you see how supportive everyone wants to be to keep us all open.
- Feeling supported creates synergy and motivation to keep going.
- The support from our community gives me hope.
- Nice to see businesses banding together.
- Being involved in a group that believes in science, trusts our leaders and supports the community gave me faith that we could pull through this.
- Thanks to those who put in time and energy to help people keep their chins up.
- I just want everyone to know I would probably be in big trouble without [the group].
30% of group members selected “having a safe and positive space to connect with people” as one of the things they liked most about Culinary Distancing COS. Additional comments from group members and owners alike indicate the group’s commitment to positivity was an important factor in group member engagement and satisfaction.

**GROUP MEMBERS**
- Very much appreciate that this isn’t a place for negative reviews or critiques. The goal is to lift up a struggling industry.
- I love that it stays positive. It’s all about support so you can be certain negativity will stay away. People have Yelp for that.
- Safe place amidst a storm - Built community at a time when lots of fear, distrust, isolation. Intentionally positive space and unapologetic about this from the start. Clear boundaries.
- We are happy that they attempt to keep the group positive and delete negative comments. I personally have left other groups that were very nasty to the food service industry.

**BUSINESS OWNERS**
- Overall I really like that there’s a ban on bashing local businesses. I get enough DMs from people on a daily basis trashing mine or one of my friends’ businesses on some other foodie platform. It’s demotivating and emotionally taxing on us as owners to hear such negativity about our restaurants and our friends’ restaurants.
- I work at a corporate-owned restaurant, so many times I get shamed in other groups because I’m not a “small-business.” This group is more protective because it was created to help the industry as a whole. There are still some people that push back, but I understand their perspectives (and I know better than to engage with negativity). One group of restaurants cannot succeed without the other. And we (at the restaurant) order local from this site as often as possible.
Despite attempts to keep the group positive and non-political, not all group members agree with administrator decisions regarding which posts to remove or allow. Admins frequently have to remind the group to be supportive and positive, but also to grant other members a bit of grace.

- The politics in the group are pretty frustrating. I participated more when I first joined, but the constant ridiculousness of the members forced me to only visit when I was looking to find a place (1x every 2 weeks-ish) vs. seeing someone post and then making almost immediate plans to visit that place.

- I really like finding new options for dining and knowing who is open or offering specials. I absolutely detest political posts, complaint posts and COVID hoax posts and the spikes in those make me reluctant to recommend the group. I don’t want to invite someone to join and then have them inundated with rants and pseudo-science or disparagement of businesses. The mods are doing their best but I’m using this survey to express that this is a real problem in the group and will hamper its growth and functionality over time.

- I do really enjoy the positivity, but normal politically motivated posts about COVID are very annoying and caused me to turn away from it for a while. Admins have become better at dealing with these posts. Businesses that have expressed that public safety is less important than ongoing business have me boycotting those restaurants.
BEFORE CULINARY DISTANCING COS: HOW MEMBERS FOUND FOOD/DRINK BUSINESSES

MORE POPULAR WAYS

- 49% posts, specials, or promotions from food and drink businesses
- 48% asking friends/family for recommendations via social media
- 48% running a Google search
- 45% review sites like Yelp or Trip Advisor
- 37% reviews or food news in the Colorado Springs Independent

LESS POPULAR WAYS

- 19% reviews or food news in the Gazette.
- 17% local bloggers and social media influencers
- 15% ads on radio, television, or in print
- 9% coupon books or mailers delivered to mailboxes

Write-in answers included other food-related Facebook groups, seeing storefronts/signs, and delivery services

67% say posts from friends/family about food and drink experiences
AFTER CULINARY DISTANCING COS: HOW MEMBERS FIND FOOD/DRINK BUSINESSES

- I search this group now first instead of Yelp or Google.
- This group is invaluable and helps inform my decisions when dining out every time.
- This group is the best resource for COS restaurants.
- This is currently our go-to for dining out/delivery/pick-up. We go to the group first to get updates to help us decide which place to support or try. We also reference specials/deals/new offerings that we wouldn’t have heard about otherwise.
- We try to choose local every time we eat out and this allows us to choose a restaurant with a greater need when we do go out.
- I always have wanted to support local restaurants and this group helped me! It has been a wonderful community to be a part of. I have learned of so many different restaurants and have received numerous recommendations.

IMPACT ON OWNERS
- I believe in the power of social media being a huge reason why we’re still surviving.
- I feel I need to up my social game.
- Clearly social media rules.
- Each ‘like’ means more support and follows.
- Word-of-mouth customers who referenced us and the Facebook page were driven to us by recommendations on the page.
- Being a food truck, people have to know where to find us and this group has allowed us to reach more customers. It also created much more awareness for our business.

“This should be part of a paradigm shift that lasts for restaurant marketing and advertising. It won’t be our last pandemic.”
KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR BUSINESSES

- Social media posts – especially posts from friends/family sharing their experiences – are the main ways members learned about food and drink businesses. Advertisements and mailers have far less impact.

- Social media content from humans is more compelling than content from a business; content from people speaking in their own voice, sharing their own experiences is the most compelling.

- Business owner vulnerability creates connection and understanding with existing and potential customers. It turns “customers” into “partners” with a personal stake in supporting the business.

- Far more people consume content than create it, so those who create content exert significant influence over those who consume it.

- IMPLICATIONS:
  - Incentivize and equip people (customers, employees, vendors, etc.) to create content about your business.
  - Collaborate with other business owners to talk about each other on social media.
  - Focus on personal storytelling and interaction more than traditional marketing posts.

HugSpeak