

CULINARY DISTANCING COS FEATURE STORY

So close together when so far apart

Culinary Distancing COS Facebook Group members rallied around pandemic-struck food-and-drink businesses, illustrating how community can feed solutions

COLORADO SPRINGS, CO, Oct. 1, 2021 — This story begins with pretzels.

Firstly, the story of a humble pretzel maker catapulted to overnight success during a business-crippling pandemic captures perfectly the power of a simple Facebook group. Secondly — and yes this metaphor is a bit cheesy — pretzels, with their interlaced structure make an ideal symbol for community twisting together to support each other, even while socially distanced.

In the early days of COVID-19, Culinary Distancing COS was created to aid restaurants, bars and industry employees of the Pikes Peak Region during the state-mandated cessation of on-site service during the coronavirus pandemic. Matthew Schniper, Food and Drink Editor at the *Colorado Springs Independent*, and Lauren Hug, a community engagement strategist, launched the group two days before a state-wide stay-at-home order went into effect as a way to connect food- and drink-loving community members to each other and to local businesses. The voluntary effort was conceived as a safe, uplifting digital space (no business-bashing, negative or divisive posts allowed) to show community support for that suddenly struggling industry.

The concept was simple: post photos of where and what members were eating and drinking; shout-out beloved spots they wanted to see survive the downturn; and tell stories of great experiences with businesses adapting to ever-changing conditions. The group's founders encouraged businesses to share their specials and new, pandemic-adapted offerings (such as take-and-bake meal kits or family-style meals), plus let the community know how to help their industry survive and thrive. The group grew rapidly and went on to sustain a high level of engagement as members connected and collaborated in exciting, innovative and unexpected ways. Food and drink businesses used the group to seek advice

on contactless pickup procedures, customer-preferred COVID safety measures and to discover whether there was demand for delivery from spots that had prior never offered it. Businesses were evolving every day in response to changing policies, guidelines and customer concerns. (Remember that overused-to-the-point-of-annoying term “pivot”?)

Which brings us back to pretzels, specifically Mark Anthony’s Pretzels.

Prior to the pandemic, business owner Mark Bryant sold exclusively to restaurants, wholesale, but he lost his entire client list inside of a day when eateries that were shuttered or suffering shrunk their offerings and, at-least-temporarily, cancelled their regular orders with him. His business was effectively dead. After lamenting that for a few days, Bryant found the will to try his hand at retail sales, personally driving and delivering \$7/dozen pretzel bags to anyone in metro Colorado Springs. He posted about that on his own Facebook business page, but a Culinary Distancing COS member saw and reposted it to the group. From there — and forgive the term which sounds insensitive during a public-health crisis — Mark Anthony’s Pretzels went viral. That post was met with a barrage of comments as customer after customer raved about the doughy, golden brown and buttery pretzels plus the beer cheese and honey mustard dips. Bryant says he expected six or seven orders maybe to come from his post; instead 50 orders flooded in, overwhelming the one-man operation, which eventually buoyed the business enough to hire staff and establish a retail storefront.

Success stories are seldomly sweeter, and Bryant says he would not be in business if it weren’t for support he received from the Culinary Distancing COS community — 8,500-plus people strong a year later. “That is the thing that started the ball moving,” he says.

Bryant’s success is also the thing that got group founders interested in assessing the impact of this online community space.

Power to the people

A survey of 400 members and 40 food-and-drink businesses was conducted from mid-December 2020 to mid-January 2021. The funding was made possible by the Pikes Peak Regional Retail and Hospitality Sector Partnership, convened by the Pikes Peak Workforce Center. The funding originated 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.

The survey revealed that an impressive 99-percent of members of Culinary Distancing COS were more informed about the local food and drink industry because of the group. Eighty-nine-percent felt more invested in that community, and 85-percent reported supporting different restaurants now than they did before joining. More than half discovered a place that has since become a go-to favorite.

“This group reminds me that we all care about our local economy and want to help it survive,” one group member wrote in the survey. “With a little bit of information, we can make better decisions.”

Around one-third of group members engaged with content on a daily basis, forming connections with other members and often finding comfort in the shared experience: a sense of kinship, of place, of purpose. According to the Colorado Institute for Social Impact (CI4SI), these survey findings would be significant at any time, but they are especially important during a pandemic. Research cited by CI4SI indicates that, during this public-health crisis, people have experienced increased fear and worry. Rates of depression, anxiety and suicide have increased. But research also indicates that several activities can boost happiness and mitigate these types of challenges, including giving to and connecting with others.

“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),” a group member responded to the survey.

Meanwhile, more than three-fourths of business owners say the group was helpful to their business during the pandemic while also having a positive emotional impact on them personally. Two-thirds saw a financial impact and roughly half say the group helped them pivot (ahem) or adapt their business to survive and thrive.

“By learning so many people saw restaurants as vital businesses to support and protect, I realized we were not alone,” says owner of downtown Italian staple Red Gravy, Eric Brenner. “My impulse to give back to the community and those in need was reciprocated many times over.”

Early in the pandemic, Brenner started his own initiative, [Meals to Heal](#), to feed frontline healthcare workers and keep staff employed. Aside from the direct impact of avoiding pandemic layoffs and showing love in the form of food to those caring for COVID patients, it was an easily replicable model other eateries could follow. Patrons could decide where the need in their community is greatest, raise money, and choose a neighborhood restaurant to make the food.

Both Brenner and the assembled Culinary Distancing COS force were responding creatively in real-time to community needs with a speed, nimbleness and community-wide scope official institutions and government agencies couldn’t match. It took nearly six months to close a single side street in Old Colorado City to create outdoor dining space for surrounding spots, and as much time for the Downtown Partnership to establish additional open-air seating for one stretch of one block. Pikes Peak Small Business Development Center was immediately on the scene helping businesses navigate federal Payroll Protection Program money or Economic Injury Disaster Loans, but for little mom-and-pops sprinkled all over the city — some with language barriers and/or cultural sensitivities — jumping through unfamiliar hoops while running a business, pivoting on a daily basis and

worrying about how to keep themselves, their families, their employees and their customers safe was an overwhelming undertaking. Some were simply unaware of those relief programs or didn't know how to apply for them, responses to the owner survey revealed.

All efforts to help the struggling food and drink industry were helpful to the businesses fortunate enough to be covered by them, but from day one of the State order to close shops for sit-down services Culinary Distancing COS members began providing support to a cross-section of businesses in big, small, uniquely personal and broadly collaborative ways. The group found an immediate foothold, a niche audience of food-and-drink enthusiasts and industry folks determined to weather the pandemic together. It proved to be a right-time, right-place tool, a positive force for good, an example of what's possible when people are given space to interact and a definitive purpose.

Supporting local food and drink businesses

"I have felt a little useless when I see how restaurants have been impacted by COVID," one survey respondent said. "The group gives me a sense that I can do SOMETHING."

The most common way Culinary Distancing Group members supported their local food and drink scene (and the way Hug and Schniper envisioned the group working) was by mindfully patronizing struggling businesses. Through posts by owners and industry professionals, group members learned about the challenges businesses were facing and the ever-changing policies and procedures businesses were subject to.

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

Indeed, forty percent of members say they learned about the wider industry by participating in the group.

“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,” one survey respondent wrote.

The French Kitchen owner Blandine Mazéran took to the airwaves, posting a personal video on Facebook that went viral through her own platform as well as Culinary Distancing COS, sharing her heart as a business owner and single mom of three girls working around the clock to pivot from in-person classes and cafe service to retail sales of raw ingredients, commercial bakery items and grab-and-go meals. The rawness of a plea for survival struck a deep chord with group members and the wider community.

Followers of her business Facebook page doubled from 3,000 to 6,000. “It really saved us,” she says.

“People shared it, the support from the community after that was tremendous.”

Group members rallied around businesses that openly asked for help. “It’s been important to know how we can help and who needs a little extra support,” a group member wrote. “Feels good to respond.” (Yet less than a quarter of business owners surveyed asked for community help.)

Culinary Distancing COS group members weren’t just consumers, these were people with a mission. People may have already been going out to grab pick-up, but Culinary Distancing COS guided them more mindfully toward destinations in need. One quarter surveyed said they asked others for recommendations on the page, while just over half championed favorite spots by making recommendations or answering questions — everything from where’s your favorite local burger spot in town to specific queries such as where to find a place with patio seating that’s also serving crab legs. Even the most passive participants gleaned info from the page; a full 85 percent say they discovered new-to-me food-and-drink places.

The passionate support group members showed to local food and drink businesses didn't spring from pity, it came from conscious choices to play a role in helping save the industry. And people adopted other socially conscious initiatives such as supporting minority-run outfits. Fifty-three percent of group members said they have or intended to support a BIPOC-owned food or drink business with 47 percent saying they have or intended to support a woman-owned business in the industry.

The restaurants felt the love: "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," one owner wrote. Another said: "Feeling supported creates synergy and motivation to keep going."

Getting creative

Beyond sharing recommendations, photos and stories about great businesses, group members mobilized and organized to support local food and drink spots in more innovative ways. One member sought to coordinate a food truck visit to their area, inquiring how many participants they'd need to make it worth the business' while. The trucks, with a mobile advantage over brick-and-mortar outfits, responded. According to one food truck owner: invitations from group members to serve in their neighborhoods became a "huge" and "profitable shift in our business model."

Early in the shutdown, when many eateries were suddenly sitting on excess inventory they couldn't sell, another group member organized a to-go order for a combined group of neighbors who gave the restaurant free reign to feed them whatever item they most needed to sell before it became waste. She shared the experience, suggesting other group members follow suit. In yet another instance, a group member asked where to find Pączki, a Polish pastry, for Fat Tuesday. That question turned into discovering that a struggling bakery, reduced to serving wholesale clients only, would be willing to specially make a bulk order. So the group member organized the purchase of at least 18 dozen Packzi, introducing others to the bakery, Dr. Sweets, and the pastry in the process.

The group's founders were amazed to see such creative and thoughtful ideas emerge from members ("oh wow, we should have thought of that!"), while restaurateurs and industry folk showed their own innovative prowess, with some using the group for informal (free!) market research.

Gather Food Studio, an in-person cooking school quickly moved to a virtual delivery method (something the owners had prior considered but had no impetus to pull the trigger on). As word spread and group members shared with friends off-platform, Gather filled classes (attracting students as far away as Alaska) and slowly expanded programming that persists to this day, even after limited on-site teaching resumed. Connecting in online classes felt especially poignant to students under quarantine who were feeling isolated, cooped up, and sometimes touch-deprived — where's a safe hug when you need one? Food is life, and the act of cooking can express joy and love, plus offer purpose for idle hands and distraction for nervous minds pondering uncertain times.

Observing the trend toward increased home cooking by people fending for themselves, local chefs began offering online classes and accompanying make-at-home meal kits. Culinary Distancing COS members amplified their offerings and provided feedback on topics and formats they wanted to see. "I finally got the nerve to take an online cooking class after watching others post about it," a group member wrote in the survey. "Now I'm hooked."

Chef owner of Rooster's House of Ramen and Happy Belly Tacos Mark Henry said he had to "get really creative so you're not providing people something they could have just made for themselves." He said restaurants had to ask themselves what they do that sets them apart, and especially how they add value.

"We got here by pushing hard and being passionate," he said, "but now we have to adapt," literally inside of a matter of days.

As such, Wobbly Olive launched a program making cocktails on peoples' porches, testing the service as a birthday treat for a Culinary Distancing COS member. Thai Lilly owner/chef Sakeo Williams expanded her dessert list, offering rotating #ThaiLillySweetTreats to make up for revenue losses elsewhere across her menu. Her gorgeous, gluten-free mochi donuts — sometimes packaged as fun and colorful decorate-your-own kits — garnered lots of attention.

There for each other

Culinary Distancing COS proved that group members weren't just participating to support restaurants; they were looking out for one another other as well.

They looked for ways to protect immunocompromised individuals and maximize community safety by collaborating on a "Safe Food/Drink Take-Out and Delivery" guide. Long before official institutions established clear safety protocols, group dialogue resulted in a free, printable one-sheet spelling out customer expectations from businesses ("We appreciate it when you answer our questions about your safety processes".) But the guide wasn't a one-sided list of requirements for food and drink businesses. It included customer pledges to businesses as well ("We gratefully acknowledge that frontline workers assume additional risk and life stress to continue serving customers." And "We will be patient with staff who have had to learn so many new procedures so quickly").

Members helped each other find everything from bags of flour to gluten-free treats to Coca-Cola cakes to vegan delivery options; some restaurants even sold toilet paper when that became a scarce commodity in grocery stores. Members also crowdsourced ideas for making pandemic birthdays, anniversaries and other occasions special. Business owners joined in by offering extra touches to make these socially isolated milestones more tolerable.

During the holiday season, the group founders witnessed perhaps the most generous community response to a post that read: "I'm alone, are there any places selling small Thanksgiving meals."

The first of 55 commenters replied: “I would love to bring you a plate on Thanksgiving day.” Others soon chimed in with the same offer, while someone else proposed an “orphan Thanksgiving Zoom date.”

Here were people who’d never met in person, true strangers during a time when folks were afraid to even be near one another for fear of catching the virus, offering to cook, deliver food and safely socialize. Members responded because it wasn’t a manufactured Hallmark moment, but because they saw a genuine human connection and exchange of care and generosity. (“I’m not crying — you’re crying.”)

Some commented to affirm the moment: “These posts warm my heart. If everyone could be this kind we would all be in a better place.” Another wrote: “Lots of great people out there, what a refreshing post. I will offer to drop a meal as well but my wife would confirm my innate ability to always burn the bird.”

Which brings us to humor: Plenty was on display as community members tried to laugh their way out of despondency and cheer one another up, at turns. Pies and Grinders got a shout-out from one group member who raved about their pizza, prefacing she was a tough critic, from New Jersey. The post blew up with 82 comments and 229 likes as people began connecting over their regional roots. “Love seeing all these Jersey peeps coming out of the woodwork!” one wrote, and the conversation turned to all kinds of other Jersey-proud items in the area. It showed that posts weren’t single-topic stagnant, but dynamic, that with active (and amused) engagement, other businesses would end up getting highlighted peripherally inside of a post that didn’t even begin necessarily relevant to them.

Be positive

“We do not believe that now is a time to essentially kick people while they are down and struggling to financially survive and keep industry people employed,” Culinary Distancing co-founder Schniper writes in the “about” section for the group. “This is not a place for posting negative restaurant reviews or reviews of pickup/delivery service. If you have had a bad experience, we encourage you to reach out to restaurant management/ownership

directly to give them a chance to resolve the issue and learn from any mistakes without public judgement.”

When *The Real World* launched in 1992 on MTV, a generation was introduced to an annoyingly memorable tagline: “This is the true story of seven strangers picked to live in a house, work together and have their lives taped — to find out what happens when people *stop* being polite and *start* getting real.”

A riff on that for Culinary Distancing COS might say: “This is the true story of 8500-plus (mostly) strangers who chose to join a Facebook group, work together and share snapshots of their dining and drinking lives — to find out what happens when people *START* being polite and *stay* real to support their beloved restaurants and bars.” Yeah, it’s wordy, but with cameras focused on pretty bites and sexy sips instead of self-conscious people, a platform for positive posts flourished.

It should be noted that the insistence on positivity by group founders Schniper and Hug captures one key reason why Culinary Distancing COS proved successful: there was an appetite for online connection free from ubiquitous trolls. Thirty percent of surveyed group members selected “having a safe and positive space to connect with people” as one of the things they liked most about the group. “Very much appreciate that this isn’t a place for negative reviews or critiques. The goal is to lift up a struggling industry,” one group member wrote. “I love that it stays positive,” another said. “It’s all about support so you can be certain negativity will stay away. People have Yelp for that.” And yet another: “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.”

The founders placed a laser focus on supporting food and drink businesses through kind discourse. Hug, author of *Digital Kindness: Being Human in a Hyper-Connected World*, is passionate about modeling positive digital behavior and creating welcoming online spaces, while Schniper’s credibility with both the industry and the community was forged from over a decade of restaurant experience followed by 15-plus years as a food critic. They made it clear the group wasn’t for debates over masks, restaurant capacities, shaming

those who opted to still dine-in (once restrictions were lifted with limitations), or debating politics or public health initiatives. They otherwise let the group freely post whatever they wished.

Sustaining positivity required constant monitoring and discussion to determine how to respond to grey-area posts, remove those that broke group rules, warn (and, when necessary, remove) violating members, repost and reaffirm the group's mission for newcomers, and reluctantly play peacemakers when certain posts devolved into unconstructive realms. Hug and Schniper also took great care to keep bots and spammers from joining, allowing only real people, the majority local.

Both believe the time was well spent, especially upon learning that three-fourths of business owners said they group positively impacted them emotionally.

“Overall I really like that there's a ban on bashing local businesses,” a business owner responded to the survey. “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.”

In the absence of internet trolls, members piggybacked on positivity, encouraging one another's emotional vulnerability and championing good ideas and heartfelt expressions of joy, gratitude and hedonistic enthusiasm (i.e. alluring photos of pretty food plates and colorful cocktails). The survey revealed that positivity, or more so benevolence of spirit, is contagious. Many restaurant owners didn't just take time to promote their own offerings, they acted like group members too, sharing suggestions for their favorite spots, celebrating their colleagues and cohorts. They also problem-solved and engaged with both members and other owners, borrowing good ideas that they found on Culinary Distancing COS.

According to the survey results, the most appealing and powerful content in the group arose organically through real, human interactions in a less antiseptic atmosphere devoid of pesky algorithms serving up sponsored content.

There's a disruptive element inherent to this. People didn't feel marketed to in a conventional way, despite hearing directly from business owners; rather, the owners often let the group in behind the scenes, detailing what life was like on the other side of the equation. Their transparency created trust and invited a chance for compassion and empathy. Group members found ways to tangibly help: for example, driving to come pick up food themselves instead of using third-party delivery platforms that charge exorbitant fees to restaurants, ultimately slashing profits toward a breakeven point — which many business owners endured simply to keep their employees working vs. idle.

Resilience and hope; key findings and takeaways

Although it's impossible to know the true, full impact the Culinary Distancing COS group had on businesses, a Social Return on Investment (SROI) study conducted by The Colorado Institute for Social Impact (CI4SI) provides expert insight. 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.

“This being the first ever Social Return on Investment (SROI) study being done on a *pandemic* business solution, the findings are incredible” says Stacey Burns, CI4SI's Co-Founder and Chief Impact Officer. “We found that above all, when community comes together around a positive, well-intended, trustworthy effort, amazing things can happen.”

So how incredible are the findings? CI4SI's SROI Study determined that total contributions of the group toward strengthening the community were nearly \$1.1 million.

“We compute realistic calculations, based on trusted, validated sources and best practices,” says Burns. “We pride ourselves in providing verifiable and transparent methodologies that

generate realistic estimations of real social value. CI4SI calculations are credible and precise — and conservative. We won't overreach."

For example, that total SROI number is based partly on a projection of each group member dining out only two times a year. Group posts and survey responses, however, indicate many members actually supported restaurants by dining out far more often. "We used to get two meals from HelloFresh every week," one group member reported, "but once I joined the Facebook group, we dropped the HelloFresh and I started picking up from local restaurants twice a week." Another member, after receiving their \$600 federal stimulus check, posted "I am going to spend it all on food from local restaurants. \$20 a day for 30 days."

CI4SI reports that, by participating in the group, members and owners alike experienced the benefits of generosity, continued to enjoy food and drink from local businesses and built a community around the local food and drink industry. Members also accessed pandemic-related information they trusted. According to CI4SI, the value of these supportive behaviors are not limited to times of crisis, the group is likely to provide numerous continued benefits for years to come.

Ninety-nine percent of group members surveyed say they're likely to continue participating in the group, "which demonstrates that this was not only a solution during a pandemic, but has created actual behavior change for a community," Burns says.

Hug and Schniper volunteered their time and expertise to create and maintain the Facebook group, so CI4SI used the amount Hug's company would usually charge for this type of digital consulting work as a proxy for the group's total expenses. This allowed CI4SI to calculate that for every dollar spent on maintaining the group, \$16.49 was returned to the community, with a potential SROI of nearly four times that.

"While other SROI projects we have done are much closer to a \$2 or \$3 return for every dollar invested, as they should be with overhead and staff and other expenses," Burns says,

“this project came in much higher due to its pure volunteer nature, with nothing to gain for the people operating it — including revenue.

“While pure volunteerism is not a realistic business model for even a mission-driven organization, this is a powerful story of two people wanting to bring a community together around food and beverage during a pandemic, and changing the community’s trajectory financially, emotionally, and digitally for the foreseeable future.”

What is realistic for businesses, says Hug, is investing in authentic digital connection and interaction. “If a simple Facebook group started in mere hours after a brief conversation about how to help a struggling industry in an unprecedented time can have so much impact, then businesses, institutions and anyone looking to build community would be well-served by exploring ways to invite participation and belonging.”

In the book *New Power*, Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms say it this way: “New power models are enabled by the activity of the crowd — without whom these models are just empty vessels. Old power models are enabled by what people or organizations own, know, or control that nobody else does — once old power models lose that, they lose their advantage... New power models demand and allow for more: that we share ideas, create new content... even shape a community.”

Which brings us back to that pretzel metaphor: ideas, content and crowd activity braided into an endless, community-building feedback loop. Far apart still, in an ongoing pandemic world, but so much closer because of a place to come together with purpose.

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