



It isn't over until ...

Florentine Opera Company innovates to survive pandemic

COVID-19 wreaked havoc on our economy and ended the life of many businesses forever. Now more than ever it has required business leaders to innovate.

Imagine you're the new CEO of an organization having taken the reins in a turnaround situation when the previous leader abruptly departed. You're starting to put in place the steps for the organization's recovery, including bringing in new talent to help lead the turnaround.

Then overnight, the government makes it impossible for your customers to purchase your services. The Florentine Opera Company in Milwaukee, which depends on putting on live performances to generate revenues, is one of many organizations that faced this situation because of stay-at-home orders during the pandemic.

Its revenue dropped dramatically. It had to face the heartbreaking task of informing the loyal customer base that their favorite shows were being canceled, disappointing not only those customers but the artists who were training for those shows.

Welcome to the world of Maggey Oplinger, CEO and general director of the Florentine Opera, one of the great cultural treasures of our community.

As luck would have it, the Florentine's board of directors had selected the right leader at the right time. With a background in the performing arts, which included training and experience as a professional opera singer in Europe, Oplinger was also no stranger to business.

Her father, Michael White, chairman of the board of Rite-Hite, early on recommended she pursue a dual-track of education and business in case her ambitions in the world of performance arts did not work out. So, her credentials included not only a degree in business but also deep experience as part of an innovation team at Johnson Controls, where she worked for more than five years. After that she worked for the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra for more

than three years.

In facing this crisis at Florentine Opera Company, Oplinger was guided by the human-centered design process. What is that? It requires businesses to offer products and services focused on the needs of their customers, not on what they think customers want or need.

This has been called "industrial empathy," pioneered by industrial design icon Henry Dreyfuss in the last century who put the needs of customers as paramount in designing products and services. We have our own Brooks Stevens, who took it to another level with his industrial designs.

Think for a minute: What if the CEO of an airline was required to sit in the middle seat of a passenger jet for a month? Consider what kind of design changes would be made to ensure the passenger in that seat has a better experience.

So here are the lessons you can learn from Maggey and apply in your business as you put the customer in the center of your strategy:

1. Why do you exist, as defined by your customer? She faced the constraints of a small budget; she could not do in-depth research reports or surveys of the current customer thinking. So, she and her team read prior analyses to determine what patrons and opera lovers found so compelling about the Florentine. The facts pointed out that they attended the Florentine because they love the core performances but with an avant-garde twist from time to time. It helped them get an understanding of what inspired their customers to attend concerts.

2. Rethink your brand in light of those findings. Everything you portray, from your website to the collateral you produce and your communication, should reflect a brand identity that delivers an experience that your customers want.

3. How can you drive revenues without the things that are traditionally available to you? One of Oplinger's great attributes is that she is a leader willing to "embrace uncertainty," meaning a leader who is willing to admit they don't

know the answers. At first, the team was skeptical, but they soon found out she was serious and then went full-bore to help her think through new approaches to generating revenue. That included a video recording of "The Tragedy of Carmen" that could be played and enjoyed by their customers online. They even developed a school production of "Cinderella" so that it could be delivered to teachers and students from home.

What you can learn from Maggey's experience is that having the humility to put the customers first, overcoming your own "confirmation bias," to get to really know your customers is the beginning of a journey that will help you deliver a product and service that will delight your customer base.

This process requires you to rethink every decision you make with the persona of your customer in mind and what they want, not what you think they want. Not an easy task, but it explains why companies like Facebook and Amazon have been such great performers in the past decade. ■



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