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**COVID-19 DIARY**

Retailers, in their own words about what happened.

**By Jay Jacobowitz**

At their May 19, 2020, meeting, the Brattleboro, Vermont Selectboard passed a resolution requiring face coverings to be worn by customers and employees in all retail establishments. It was part of an expanded discussion of Covid-19 and business issues.

In hindsight, some independent natural products retailers believe they could have anticipated the impact of Covid-19 as early as February. But, by the time the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic on March 11, all hell broke loose. Since early April, I've spoken with independents around the country to gauge the impact, and their responses to the disease outbreak.



**Muted Spring.** New town ordinance to wear masks in retail stores goes into effect May 20. Sign at entrance to Brattleboro Food Coop notifies customers. Photo: Jay Jacobowitz

**EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE**

**East Coast retailer:** “Just one employee, whose wife works at [a local supermarket chain] got Covid-19. There was no playbook for this. We had to learn on the fly. We sat with employees and said, ‘If you’re not comfortable, no pressure.’ We assured them that they are not looked down upon. A couple employees at first didn’t show up, but did after a couple of weeks, and adapted to the new norm. One employee with a small daughter at home, is now back. Overall our employees have been really good to us.”

**Northeast retailer:** “Our two key managers were getting exhausted, as was the team, and everyone was frightened. Part of it was that we had so many customers. Even though social distancing wasn’t in full effect, it was still creating havoc. Even if we were doing everything right, having that many people in a confined space, way over 500 people per day, in 2,800 square-foot retail, with a back room for receiving of about 700 square feet, including a small office and restroom.

“We shut down for a week to reassess. Our key managers had a plan to stay open in some form, but we shut fully for a week. They were relieved, even though they had a plan to make curb deliveries, and to limit customers in store. We gave everyone a paid week off. Also we furloughed some people, based on advice of an employment lawyer. Full timers were on medical insurance through April, other than those that were furloughed. After the week closed, we reopened at about 40 percent of our regular volume.”

**Northwest retailer:** “We do require masks of our employees, unless they are by themselves, when they can pull down the mask and relax. We think our 170 employees have the common sense to deal with this, for example, restocking before store hours at 6:00 a.m. Most have got it. Those that don’t get it put a scarf around their neck and say they’ll pull it up when they’re with a customer, but they push it. There is a line in the state health department rule from the governor, that there are some who can’t wear masks, and anyone who has breathing difficulties doesn’t have to. We can’t require a doctor’s note, or disclose why they can’t wear the mask to the other employees. We can only say some are unable to wear masks.”

**West Coast retailer:** “We are able to provide extended leave to employees who need it. We’ve also been able to absorb some employees from [non-retail activities] into each store, cleaning carts, wiping doors, with some integrated into departments. We now may need to hire more because of the toll on our core staff. The further we go [into the pandemic], the more nervous we get. Some employees are caring for others at home, so they don’t want to be a carrier. We provided paid sick time for a couple of weeks.

“Morale was really strong initially. Everyone really showed up during the initial crush. Then exhaustion set in, once the crowds subsided, but before we limited the number of customers in-store, there was a turn in morale; maybe it was the reality that this isn’t going away anytime soon, but going to get worse, so morale took a dip at that time. Once we started limiting customers in-store, it allowed staff to operate much more consciously, moving around more freely.”

**Midwest retailer:** “We lost a few employees right in the beginning, those with children and elderly, and we didn’t do any hiring at first. But curbside pickup was a real challenge. Then employees came forward and said they could work more, because their other jobs were furloughed, or they were laid off. We made our part-timers full time, which really helped with curbside pickup, because it was chaos. We had to cut hours in half in our second store because we couldn’t staff it. We dialed back hours at our main store too, mainly for sanity, so we didn’t have to run two shifts, and to allow for store cleaning at night.”

**Southern retailer:** “We didn’t even mask up until a county judge said we’d be fined. The Friday before the mask law went in, we brought everybody masks. That same day four county precinct police came in, with whom we are very friendly. Our registered dietician comes out and pulls up her mask. The cops say, ‘Starting Monday you’ll be fined.’ Our RD answered, ‘No I won’t. I know the Constitution.’ In the end, our governor overruled the county judge, and said there will be no fines, but asked everyone to mask up.

“All our employees have their masks, and we’re routinely cleaning the counters, touch screens, and bottles, which we already did, but now are doing it more frequently, along with hand washing. Employees at first were nervous, with people coming in the store, but they have got more used to working.

“One challenge was the increased phone calls, ringing off the hook. Now it has died down some. We’ve got a great team that really rolled with the punches. They are so committed to helping people. No one got sick to this point, and no one didn’t want to work, but we were prepared to cover the gap if we needed to. We maintained our usual schedules. One employee’s wedding was in March, so now that’s been moved to July.”

**New York retailer:** “Adapt’ is the key word. There have been new challenges weekly regarding, for example, masks, and conflicts over why customers must wear them. It is not our duty to enforce the guidelines. Other challenges include receiving, and e-commerce.

“New York is the first [major Covid-19 hot spot] in the country, ground zero again. Shielding cashiers for example, goes against our mission of connecting and engaging. Training new employees who are uncomfortable dealing with the public is a new challenge, compared to our usual job applicants. They have concern for their families at risk, by being a grocer, and being a cashier. But, overall, our employees are amazing. They are wearing their masks.

“The conflict is when customers come in without wearing a mask. Other customers expect us to enforce the governor’s order. But, if we engage the customer, they are ready to fight. So, we’ve instructed our employees not to engage. We can’t argue their belief in what is true, so it’s a no-win situation. We just keep social distance. We have retractable screens for the cashiers that they can use when serving customers without masks. Less than one-percent of customers don’t wear a mask.”

**Midwest retailer:** “We weren’t staffed for the rush, but our employees were having fun with it, because they were keeping busy and focused. Five of 110 employees took an absence, with three still out, and two now back. We had a couple of scares, about older age, with the younger two employees having aging parents. But after one to two weeks, they came back.

“On March 27, the mask order came down from the state. We put stickers on the floor for social distancing, and have had full compliance. We had to get masks for the employees. Only a small minority of customers don’t wear the

masks. We don't police it. We have Plexiglas for the cashiers, and made continuous adjustments as the guidelines morphed. We did not change our hours."

#### CUSTOMER ATTITUDES, BEHAVIOR AND IMPACT ON SALES

**East Coast retailer:** "Most, 99.9 percent, of our customers are fine, then there are the ones who want to make it into a constitutional argument. Which makes me think, *But I'm the one that's going to be punished, not you*. In our state, the guidelines are, if you are a retailer caught once with [customers or employees with] no masks, you are reduced to 50 percent capacity. Second violation, 25 percent capacity, then shut down. We are doing what we can to be there for the community. We don't agree with all the guidelines, and we didn't make the rules, but we have to follow them. Our soapbox folks have calmed down, and are coming back in with masks."

**West Coast retailer:** "Customers are using cash one-third as often as they used to. People aren't handling cash."

**Northeast retailer:** "With our store, we also saw the boom mid-Feb to mid-March, when we decided to close for a week, to examine what direction we would take. Our sales were 50 percent more than normal in those weeks, over the prior year. Sales were booming."

**Southeast retailer:** "In March, we had record days due to coronavirus. Supplements have been driving sales, but groceries are selling well too. We sold out of hand sanitizer right away. People were coming in who had never come in before, and were regularly dropping \$150, so we may be getting new customers. They're mostly buying immune boosting products.

"Some staff are stressed out, irritated with customers who are coming in casually, who are just out and about, and not taking social distancing seriously.

"Although we ended 2019 slightly down from prior year, 2020 year-to-date is up 7.2%, which is mostly from the last few weeks, and we are up 23% month to date. We have had countless customers say they are so grateful we are here."

**Northwest retailer:** "The mask issue is the bane of my life. There are a lot of customers that don't wear them, more than a third. [One county] health department where we operate has issued a directive for employees to wear masks at all times. [Another county] has been much more relaxed, and only encourages it. We don't require for masks for our customers. So, we've had numerous customers [who wear masks] angry about that. We've been getting angry emails that it is rude and dangerous.

"But, we say nothing to customers about masks. And, unless there is a state mandate, we will not require customers to wear masks. We follow local, state and CDC guidelines to the best of our ability. Most of the time customers are pretty mellow. So many of them don't wear masks. The biggest thing in all of this is the panic mode, the meat panic."

**Midwest retailer:** "Customers initially were angry out of fear, and were panic buying. We were concerned about customers overbuying and returns, so we added a policy that you couldn't bring things back during this time, like 30 bottles or 25 cases of things.

"Mostly people were gracious, and were looking for advice, and really listening on diet and supplementation. We got a lot of new faces, and believe we will retain new customers. Even now in late May, we are continuing to see new faces. They are mostly asking for basic advice on a good multivitamin, on eating more fruits and vegetables, on healthier eating habits, and on lifestyle. Most of our sales in April shifted to grocery from supplements in March, so those are lower margin."

**Southern retailer:** "There was a March surge, with people we hadn't seen in 20 years, coming in not just from [supernatural chain competitors], but really feeling the need for advice. 'I need to be on top of my health, because stuff is going to start happening.' We are seeing both new and renewed customers. In the last year, we remodeled, adding bookshelves, and reducing our product assortment, to focus on using 'minimum advertised price' (MAP) policy vendors only, ones that don't play the Amazon game. So, we have a nicer look to our stores.

"As the pandemic wore on, especially with the lockdown, our numbers dropped. Since then, they've recovered to our pre-pandemic levels, and we're maintaining, and we're considered an essential business. Some days are a bit stronger, or weaker, but it evens out during the week. Restaurants nearby are still empty."

**Northeast retailer:** "Customer comments are of thanks, appreciation. We're doing lots of pickup and delivery. Business is doing well. One well-to-do customer shared her [federal] stimulus money with our employees."

**New York retailer:** “Less than one percent of customers come in without a mask. But, other customers expect us to enforce the governor’s order. But, if we engage the customer, they are ready to fight. So, we’ve instructed our employees not to engage. We can’t argue their belief in what is true, so it’s a no-win situation. We just keep social distance.”

**Midwest retailer:** “In mid-March, there was a two-week, pandemic-driven customer rush to stock up, especially on sanitation and immune products. Customers also were asking questions and seeking answers more intently than before. We had higher customer counts, and not many customers who were upset. Mostly, they expressed appreciation for us being there, and being in-stock. Very few were upset with long lines. We weren’t staffed for the rush. Most customers were very kind and appreciative.

“Our basket size is up 40 percent, and is holding steady now through late May. We have seen more new customers, as well. Amazon is three weeks out to deliver vitamin C, which we’ve had in stock, and on sale right along. We didn’t hold products for customers, but are now back to holding for one day. We’ll hold a sale over for one day, but no rainchecks. The phone were ringing off the hook the first two weeks, all day, so management had to answer the phones, to let our front line folks do their jobs, and keep the flow at the registers.”

*Note: This retailer came down with Covid-19, with symptoms of heart pounding on short walks, and tested positive for the antibodies, recovering after two weeks of self-quarantine.*

## PICKUP, DELIVERY & ONLINE

**East Coast retailer:** “Our curbside business and mail order business are much more now. We are serving customers based on everyone’s comfort level, we’ll have their order ready at the register, at curbside, whatever they want. We had done e-commerce years ago, and haven’t done it now, but are looking into it again.”

**Northwest retailer:** “Our parking lot pickup has been very active. If you don’t feel like coming in, we’ll accommodate that, and it is growing hugely, with many customers doing that. There are positions we’ve had to add to do that, and for our bulk department, and for sanitizing, and people to monitor that. There is no self-serve, so these have all added costs to the business. Older people are doing the parking lot pickup.”

**West Coast retailer:** “Our website is a pretty good place to see what we are doing [with Covid-19 policies], most of it is up there. We invested in a local delivery service over a year ago, figuring we’d add it as a service, but it’s now essential, some level of it. So we really hit it perfectly, starting a week to 10 days after we could have [when the surge started], and it’s off the charts.

“We have to limit deliveries, and our click-and-pick up service is four to five days out. But that is a matter of training shoppers, growing shoppers. We will be able to increase the number of picks per hour, which are four to six now, and we’re shooting for eight per hour. Delivery is flying off the hook too, in [one of our stores.] Couldn’t ask for a better start. It really helps round out the store. Once a week we are bringing in the delivery and click-and-pick numbers into our total numbers, and it looks like foot traffic in the stores is holding its own.”

**Midwest retailer:** “Curbside was a real challenge for staffing. I [the store owner] was receiving, picking, and delivering to cars all March and April. Our elderly customers were really encouraged to see my face. [She] is putting groceries in my car.’ They were quite panicked, so were calmed by seeing me.

“We have no e-commerce, because our database isn’t clean enough to launch anything that wouldn’t be chaotic, based on the advice from [our POS vendor.]

“We created a web site order form, because orders were not organized—we’d get orders for produce, grocery, then more produce, for example. Now we’ve streamlined the order process with the online order form.”

**Southern retailer:** “Fortunately, in the last year, we got all our products put onto Shopify; our main products. We already had in-store pickup as an option, so that played into the pandemic well. We saw a really big rise in online, and a big increase in call-in orders that don’t use online—10 to 20 percent of our business is phone orders. We also already had pickup, and we added the option to call when they got to the store, and we would run it out to them, for social distancing.”

**New York retailer:** “We have a web-cart, through [our POS vendor], with our inventory online. We are working on making it more shoppable. Before Covid-19, nobody cared until now. Delivering and picking orders has strained our resources. You have to make sure your inventory online is bulletproof, that what you have online is definitely on the shelf.”

**Midwest retailer:** “We do not have online, e-commerce. There is a small minority of customers asking for delivery, such as the elderly, which we do when we have time. Our slower stores had more time to do deliveries, and curbside pickup, with mobile credit card systems, and were able to deliver to their cars.”

#### PREPARED FOODS, BULK, SANITIZATION AND SERVICE LEVELS

**Southeast retailer:** “We shut down the eat-in part of the deli, so we just have grab-and-go. A lot of customers are coming in intentionally to get takeout, and we are doing about half of what we normally do. On a Monday, the health department said we need six feet between tables, and no more than 50 people. We moved some tables out, but there’s no way we can enforce distancing in the dining area. The next day they said takeout only, anyway.”

**Northwest retailer:** “The impact on our foodservice is big. Our deli immediately went down. We had to close the salad bar, and could have kept the cold case open, but we just knew customers felt it was too open for them, because sales just dropped. Grab-and-go has been very good. People still want our foods. We’re making tons of ready to go salads, and side salads, which just fly out, but they take a lot more work, and supplies and costs. So deli sales have been down, but increased in May again.

“One of our stores didn’t lose as much deli because we continued to do custom sandwiches and soup, but that store doesn’t do as much with grab-and-go. Staffing is a problem. Bakery sales have been steady. We’ve moved a lot of baked goods to the customer service desk up front, as people don’t circulate to the deli as often.

“The lack of employees was a huge problem, forcing us to cut store hours down also. And we’ve had to add positions to do bulk sanitizing, monitoring, serving where there is no longer self-serve in bulk, have all added costs to the business.”

**West Coast retailer:** “We make announcements over the public address system periodically, a reminder to keep distance, the limit of 40 customers in the store; the changes to our bulk department. It is okay to use the bulk bins, and we wipe down pull handles, but the county and state have restricted full use of the departments. We are packaging all the other stuff, and staff is servicing customer requests. We eliminated the five-gallon fill-up-your-own water machine. And there are no returns.

“We started special senior and immune compromised hours. Prepared foods is closed to anything self-serve, like the salad bar, and pizza hot table. We are still making to-order, and still doing wrapped foods. Our hot pans are filled with pre-wrapped hot soups and burritos. On the cold side, our salad bar is now in to-go in packages, and cold soups are in jars. We are keeping up with all grab-and-go refrigerator runs, so they are nice and full now.”

#### VENDOR RESPONSE & SUPPORT

**East Coast retailer:** “I believe when the going gets tough, the tough get going. A lot of vendors and sales reps have been on top of it, informative on out-of-stocks and in-stock ETAs. Even [our primary distributor] their online inventory has been good with dates items are expected back in stock. Other vendors have said they have inventory, and the invoice shows up blank. Stressful times show where these companies really are with transparency.”

**Southeast retailer:** “[Our primary vendor] says it is trying to catch up to the rush. Parceling out orders more. Elderberry was out of stock, and now it’s getting back into stock.”

**Northwest retailer:** “We just heard from one main local meat supplier that this is the last order we’ll get for a while. [Our primary distributor] had 14 pages of out-of-stocks, double the normal level. Our buyers say our distributor has had huge increase in coop home deliveries, a legacy business of theirs. That has been annoying.”

**West Coast retailer:** “Today was the best day we’ve had since the crush three weeks ago. We got two trucks today in [one of our stores] with 20 pallets of product, which filled in the store for the first time, the huge gaps we’ve had. I think [our primary distributor] made the judgment to not waste time and energy shipping ponzu sauce, or anything that was not a staple. They don’t have enough coverage in their warehouse due to employee outs. You are trying to get your head around the new level of business. Early on when the huge reorders hit the system. It shouldn’t have caught us by surprise, we should have seen it coming. We could have seen the items per customer shooting up, even a couple of weeks before [five weeks ago.]”

**Midwest retailer:** “Our vendors have given so much support, our brokers and direct line reps, with daily emails on what is available and back in stock, and getting us the best deals possible, on commodity items, elderberry, zinc, C, quercetin, and other immune stuff.”

**Southern retailer:** “Our vendors, for the most part, have been very proactive, especially our private label suppliers, with out-of-stock updates. Our reps have been very good with what’s coming back in stock, especially early on, calling us regularly, so we could add to our order. Some of our vendors had to change to email instead of phone orders. They were also very clear on what they were doing to maintain health in their facilities.”

**New York retailer:** “Our small, local vendors have been great. [Our primary distributor] has skipped many orders, favoring larger customers, we believe. But we’ve gone from 85 percent out-of-stock to 15 percent out-of-stock on our shelves, overall.”

**Midwest retailer:** “Our vendors also didn’t anticipate the rush. But many were very good communicating on out-of-stocks, especially vitamins, vitamin C, zinc...it’s out now and when it’s expected back in, for example. None took away our discounts, or limited our orders. Some deliveries were delayed up to two weeks, especially on some vitamins, and on non-essentials, where we had no notice. Our product reps are staying home.”

#### PAYCHECK PROTECTION & DISASTER LOANS

**East Coast retailer:** “We decided not to apply for the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) or the Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL.) We’re doing well, our sales are up, and we’re paying our bills. We just felt it was the right thing to do. We weren’t expecting the [Los Angeles] Lakers, or Ruth’s Chris to take it, but the local hair salon. We felt we would leave it for the more-need-y.”

*Note: Both the Lakers and Ruth’s Chris have said they will repay the loans they received.*

**Midwest retailer:** “We applied for and got the Paycheck Protection Program.”

**Southern retailer:** “We got the Paycheck Protection Program, which we had to reapply for during the second round. We needed it, because business was way down.”

**New York retailer:** “We did not apply for the PPP or EIDL. We’re not sure of the system. We are basically happy that we are operating, but are checking with our accountant to see if we should apply.”

#### LANDLORD & LEASE NEGOTIATIONS

**Northeast retailer:** “I am waiting, not patiently anymore, for the leasing manager of our landlord for what they are going to do to help us move forward. Their offers of one half-month’s rent for the next two months, then until November, both of which I rejected, because it is not material. Major landlords in the area have done rent forgiveness, as are other landlords.

“Our landlord explained they too have expenses, and mortgages. They sent links to federal grants in their formal offer, which I thought was kind of patronizing. I responded, ‘Some of these things are also available to you.’ Musical chairs is a good analogy.”

#### POPULAR IMMUNE PRODUCTS

**Northeast retailer:** “Fire Cider recipe: raw apple cider vinegar, lemon, horseradish root, ginger root, garlic, white onion, beets, and hot peppers. I take a tablespoon or more each day. All organic. And I have also added some extra probiotic supplements to my mix and have increased my consumption of fermented foods, especially, but not only, kimchi. My coronavirus immune support list includes: astragalus, NAC, spirulina, zinc, elderberry, selenium, vitamins C and D, green tea and or PU’erh tea. And especially mushrooms, especially MyCommunity and Mycoshield from Host Defense. To be sure, some of the above I would actually stop taking if I thought I had or was confirmed to have coronavirus, or other illnesses.”

**Southeast retailer:** “Vitamins C and D, sovereign silver, and echinacea.”

**Midwest retailer:** “Elderberry, zinc, vitamin C, quercetin, commodity immune stuff.”

## POST-PANDEMIC THOUGHTS & PROJECTIONS

**Northeast retailer:** “The biggest issue is not what we are going to do now, although it is financially stressful, but later. Can we have 500 or 700 people in our [2,800 square foot] store on a regular basis? Curbside delivery is not the same thing as product discovery, and remembering items shoppers need but have forgotten, and impulse buying. People often say they spend all their money when they come in our store. A friend of ours who owns tennis and fitness clubs just laid off 600 people. What’s going to happen when we think things are sort of okay? Will we come streaming back to work out on equipment? Do yoga in a class of 30 people?”

“One of the partners of someone who works for us tested positive for Covid-19, so they got tested and we’re waiting for the results. Another employee is immune-compromised with asthma. And there are false negatives in the tests. I had a 100.1 degree fever, and called my health provider. They said, ‘You might have coronavirus, and we don’t want you to come in.’”

“Compared to the 2008-09 crisis; we did really well at that time. We knew what direction to go, to hire more people, carry more product, and provide awesome customer service. This situation has too many variables, and is creating too much fear.

“We are not going to turn down government assistance, but it is not going to solve all our problems. I don’t want to dismiss optimism, and want to remember the reason we got started in the natural foods business in the first place. The things Rachel Carson and others were talking about many decades ago.

“But now, I don’t have a clue what we are going to do going forward. One thing is, I’m not worried about getting, having, or dying from the virus. It is inevitable that we will know someone who gets, becomes ill, and dies from it. The hype however is excessive. And there are mitigating factors.

“The death rate is actually much lower. We are reassessing what we are going to do. No one in the store has exhibited signs of Covid-19. This shutdown is in an abundance of caution.

“My main point, what we are almost afraid to discuss, we are thinking things are going to go back to some kind of normal, like it was. We know there will be changes. But the uncertainty about a resurgence. And what is the cost of this isolation, and not having social contact? How will we stay sane, well protected? The negative side is how we marginalize the elderly. Because they were worried about my age, our managers issued a benevolent, compassionate ban on me, in-store during hours. The possibilities are tremendous for creating the society we’ve known we’ve needed for decades, but I don’t want to be alive a world that has gone crazy.”

**Southern retailer:** “I don’t know what will happen based on shutdown effects. Definitely more people are interested in supplements than before, but I don’t have any answers for this virus.”

**New York retailer:** “We have more business overall, but is it the right inventory? Our expenses to pick orders is higher. Essentially there’s been too much change in too short a time. The bottom line is: People will not act the same after this goes away.” **WF**