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How a Popular
Online Florist Became

an Essential Service in the Early Days of COVID-19

Case study

Retailers must act fast when customer buying habits change practically overnight. At the onset of COVID-19, our client's sales dropped to a mere 10% of its pre-pandemic norm. We helped our client reinvent itself as an essential business and increase its revenue by 50%.

Summary

The appearance of COVID-19 caused consumers around the world to reassess their buying habits. Whether a financial crunch, the need for contactless shopping, or job insecurity, shoppers were immediately — and understandably — cautious about spending. Wants and whims moved to the end of the list, and customer spending was driven by need and availability. Our client, NetFlorist, had to find its place in the chaos and fight for its survival.

About NetFlorist

NetFlorist is South Africa's largest online gift and fresh flower delivery service. It is also South Africa's oldest e-commerce company, founded by three friends in 1999. Over two decades, the retailer grew to handle over 700,000 orders per year.

NetFlorist uses world-class technology and global sourcing, allowing its customers to send floral arrangements and gifts for special occasions to recipients in South Africa and around the world. NetFlorist's track record of quality and same-day delivery make the online retailer a preferred choice.

Objective | From expendable to essential

While social distancing, job insecurity, and shelter-in-place mandates put extras and nice-to-haves on the backburner, groceries, toiletries, and household supplies became the priorities for consumers. Flowers and specialty items were considered frivolous. It came as no surprise that NetFlorist's orders dropped to a mere 10% of their regular volume just a day before lockdown.

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NetFlorist had two very urgent needs:

- Establish a secure future for itself and its employees
- Become relevant to its customers, who now had different, more pressing needs

These reasons motivated NetFlorist to risk its brand reputation and successful business model. In the early days of the pandemic, customers needed flour, not flowers. They sought to endure, not celebrate. NetFlorist utilized its large fleet and same-day delivery service to bridge the gap between homebound customers and essentials needs. We stepped in to build that bridge.

Challenges | A forced shift in behaviour

Offering essential items for sale meant a steady flux of orders instead of the predictable, holiday-driven surge for flowers and specialty gifts. It also meant a critical change in the delivery system, as the person ordering was also the recipient. Customer expectations would be starkly different, and NetFlorist had to consider — and cater — to those changed expectations.

The first major hurdle to overcome was the disorganized, cumbersome connection between NetFlorist and its community of partners. Communications were outdated and unreliable, and would have to be overhauled before a modern customer experience could be put into place. Given the need to survive as a business, time was of the essence. NetFlorist had to provide a practical, dependable, and helpful customer experience from order to delivery.

Numerous changes to front-end assets (such as the website), back-end processes, and applications would be required to create a new experience. Call centers being non-operational as a result of the lockdown further complicated the project.

Solution | Bridging the gaps

Customer experience, application management, and supply chain management were the key areas of change that we had to connect to create a new framework for our client's application landscape. Using this framework as a guide, we moved quickly to catalog vendor products, price items, update inventory, and other information on NetFlorist's website. By reengineering the application landscape and developing reliable API integrations, we were able to sync inventory data from vendors with payment systems. This allowed customers to receive a notification and automatic refund if an item ordered suddenly became out of stock with a vendor. The payment process was also modified to revise delivery charges from per-item to per-delivery, to better meet the new pattern of orders. We also put in place an agile and effective email support system to bridge the gap caused by the lack of a functioning call center. These modifications created a seamless buying experience for NetFlorist's customers.

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Our Impact | 360 degrees in 36 hours

There was a great deal to accomplish in a limited amount of time. We reworked our client's digital facade, including front-end assets like the website and core systems, and back-end applications, so NetFlorist could serve its customers in a meaningful way. We accomplished this shift in roughly three days — from the announcement of the impending lockdown to the lockdown's actual start. We worked closely with our client to launch a new business model, enabling NetFlorist to accept its first grocery order within thirty-six hours.

We continued this momentum immediately after launch, focusing on the quality of experience rather than the quantity of orders. In four days, NetFlorist had regained 50%-60% of its pre-lockdown order volume. Even with the added complexity of both teams working from home, we quickly achieved a new business model for NetFlorist. NetFlorist strengthened its customer loyalty by taking action to meet essential customer needs under extraordinary circumstances.

Zensar and NetFlorist | Why it worked

We've been a technology partner to NetFlorist for over seven years. During that time, we've incrementally built the foundation for an agile set-up, allowing NetFlorist to adapt quickly to dramatic changes in customer behavior.

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