

Local breweries craft new ways to keep customers: how the small independents respond to the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The craft beer industry grew significantly during the 2017-2019 with small independent breweries capturing 25.4% of sales. By the end of 2019, the Maine Brewer's Guild reported 155 licensed breweries across the state, more than double the number just five years earlier. The economic impact of Maine brewpubs in 2019 exceeded \$668 million (See Figure 1) ranking 31st among the 50 states. Production in 2019 reached 361,705 barrels of craft beer, 18th in the United States. So, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, small, independent breweries quickly pivoted to adapt to the new and rapidly changing business environment.

This case examines how a small industry in a small state continuously adapted to a new business environment where both citizens and government officials differed significantly on business restrictions during the pandemic. Remarkably, the Maine Craft Beer industry emerged from the pandemic stronger than ever. Although the pandemic may largely be a thing of the past, there could be recurring variations of COVID-19 and future additional pandemics, but the Maine craft beer industry will be ready.

Keywords: Business response to COVID-19, craft breweries, Maine brew pubs

Author's Note: This case is based upon actual events, although names have been changed and other certain data altered to maintain confidentiality.

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A growing industry adds a new player

Sales for the craft brewing industry grew by double-digits from 2017 to 2019, with craft breweries owning 25.4% of market share. At the end of 2019, there were also 8,275 operating craft breweries, almost double the number from just back in 2015. According to the Maine Brewer’s Guild, by the end of 2019 there were 155 active, licensed breweries across the state. Just five years earlier, the number was only 73. The economic impact of Maine brewpubs in 2019 exceeded \$668 million (Brewers Association) ranking 31st among the 50 states. Production in 2019 reached 361,705 barrels of craft beer, 18th in the United States.

Jack Miller and Brian “Sandy” Vigue are commercial fishermen who work boats along the Maine coast. Although they would like to own their own boat, neither had the money it would take to buy their own boat and equipment. Commercial fishermen could make a good living if there are enough good weather days and the various seafood stocks remained sufficient. Along the coast of Maine, lobsters and scallops were the most valued catch and fishermen generally caught haddock, mackerel, cod, and tuna. The larger seafood businesses with larger boats usually fared much better financially. Although they loved the sea, Jack and Sandy knew the chances of their being able to buy their own boat and equipment was slim, and that commercial fishing is considered one of the most dangerous occupations in the country. In addition, your income was largely determined by the season and weather, as well as the value of the ship’s catch.

The men dreamed of opening their own brewpub, much like the ones they frequented in their free time. It would not have to be fancy or located in one of the larger cities. Both men had learned the art of brewing over the winter season when fishing was slow. In addition to taking a course at the community college, they also worked part-time for one of the larger breweries in the Portland, Maine area. The fishing year had been pretty good and each of them were able to save a few thousand dollars. Of course, that was far from what they needed to open a brewpub but then, over Labor Day weekend, the lottery tickets they purchased together paid off---the friends won \$100,000!

They found an old, closed hotel in the town of Winterport, not far away. The hotel had a small bar and restaurant, and they could live in a couple of the hotel rooms upstairs. As the hotel had been vacant for some time, they were able to lease the property for a reasonable price. The partners named the brewpub “The Moose Pointe brewpub” after a nearby state park with a lighthouse on the bay. The pub opened in late November with strong December sales, including New Years’ Eve. The New Year also started off well as the brewpub added several new beers, including Lighthouse Lager and expanded the pub menu. It was beginning to look like 2020 would be a great year for the new business.

Then in early March 2020 the coronavirus (COVID-19) hit and hit hard. The virus was reportedly very contagious and potentially deadly, especially for persons with high risk factors, especially for elderly persons.

Table 1: 2019 Small Business Profile, U.S. Small Business Administration

147,270 small businesses in Maine	56.5% of Maine employees	289,156 Maine small business employees
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A brew pub owners' struggle with staying open

The first couple weeks of March were especially difficult as business owners across the state did not know how to respond to Covid-19. Early in the pandemic, little was known about the virus and so both officials and business owners did the best to protect employees, customers, and the public. One of the single biggest days of the year for many bars and pubs is St. Patrick's Day, March 17th. It really hurt to close the pub that day, but Jack and Sandy knew it needed to be done. The very next day, Governor Mills ordered all bars and restaurants with dine-in service closed until the end of the month.

Meanwhile, the Maine Brewer's Guild stepped up and helped brewers change to producing hand sanitizer. Hand sanitizer is alcohol based so the switch is not too difficult, though a bit tricky. The brewers needed to be able to produce medical grade sanitizer for use by medical personnel in hospitals and other health care facilities. Brewers in Maine and other states quickly reacted to the pandemic by switching production to manufacture hand sanitizer. The brewers focused their production efforts on fulfilling the need for medical grade sanitizer in hospitals around the state. Working with the University of Maine, the brewers were able to fill a critical need early in the pandemic.

The Maine Brewer's Guild also encouraged the brewers to step up off-premises sales by filling growlers and howlers that customers could purchase through curbside takeout. A growler is a 64 oz. refillable container made of glass or aluminum used to carry fresh tap beer for takeout use.

Some brewers also began offering deliveries to customers within delivery areas. But the next blow came on March 31 when the Governor issued a "stay at home" order for all persons except for persons working an essential job or for an essential personal reason, such as obtaining food, medicine, health care, or other necessary purposes.

Jack and Sandy were committed to making the pub successful, but COVID was making that extremely difficult. They already switched over to off premises sales with takeout sales and delivery. Even so, overall sales were down by more than 30 percent. The brew pub could not afford to purchase their own can production line and in fact, even if they could afford canning production, can sales would not be sufficient to make that investment.

The men also considered adding a restaurant license but to do so, they would need to hire kitchen and wait staff in addition to purchasing more kitchen equipment and inventory. A detailed proposed budget indicated that the men would have to come up with at least \$120,000 to start the restaurant. Then, the restaurant would have to become profitable and help increase beer sales. At this time, restaurants were limited to opening only to 50 percent capacity.

Without increasing sales back to pre-COVID levels the men would not be able to keep the brewpub open for long. Although the brewpub had already built a loyal following, the actual number of customers was small. As with most brewpubs in Maine, they would be dependent on a busy tourist season which would not likely occur this year. There are also several other brewpubs in a 25-mile radius, most located in larger cities such as Bangor and Ellsworth.

Jack and Sandy sat at the bar one night pondering their situation over a glass of Lighthouse Lager. But ideas were few and the men decided to meet with their banker the next day and hopefully, she would be able to loan the money for the restaurant and help come up with some suggestions to keep the brewpub open. Jack and Sandy were able to come up with one idea that had some potential. The brewpub had a large porch that ran along the whole front of the

building that looped around another side of the building. In addition, the property had a large parking lot that help provide additional outdoor seating.

COMPOUNDING CHALLENGES

Constantly changing regulations

One of the difficulties for government officials and citizens is the lack of knowledge and understanding about this new virus. Consequently, officials have had to reverse earlier recommendations causing confusion and even distrust of officials.

Brewpubs often serve appetizers or snacks and expected to fall under the category of a restaurant, allowing to stay open at least partially, during the pandemic. However, the Manager of Licensing and Housing Safety for the City of Portland publicly announced that to qualify for a restaurant license, the pub owners would have to demonstrate that in fact, they serve real meals, not just appetizers and snacks.

Aluminum can shortage

Although the aluminum can shortage began prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic further exacerbated the problem. The shift from on-premises sales to off-premises sales meant that many sales would be in aluminum cans and crowlers. Crowlers are 32 oz. aluminum cans used for transporting beer but unlike a growler, not refillable. However, aluminum cans became short in supply as the major brewers' sales also shifted from beer on tap to carryout. This added to the list of problems facing brewers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To combat the aluminum can shortage, many brewers contracted with a mobile can production service. The cost to develop their own aluminum can production line would be several hundred thousand dollars which most breweries were not able to afford.

A pox upon your tourist season!

In 2017, 9 million tourists visiting Maine visited a brewery while traveling to the state. This amounts to 20% of all the tourists who visited the state in that year. Maine is a tourist destination for people across the northeast and beyond, for outdoors enjoyment of nature and sporting activities. Maine is known for fishing for trout and salmon, along with hiking and camping, as well as boating in spring and summer. In the fall, Maine becomes a destination to see the colorful New England foliage and hunting for deer and moose. In winter, Maine offers fantastic skiing, snowmobiling, and ice fishing. You might even enjoy watching dog sled racing in the northern part of the state.

But COVID has taken a heavy toll on the Maine tourist season. Some restaurants and motels heavily dependent on tourists never even opened. County fairs, church suppers, and festivals were cancelled. But the worst cancellation was the Maine 200th Anniversary celebration with events spread throughout the year and across the state, including the Windjammer fleet stopping at various locations along the Maine coast.

Quarantine for tourists began in March, requiring persons coming into Maine from out of state to self-quarantine for 14 days. Governor Mills modified this requirement, exempting residents of New Hampshire and Vermont as those states reported low levels of COVID-19. On

July 1, the quarantine requirement was again modified to allow persons coming in from out of state to take a COVID test within 72 hours of arriving in Maine in lieu of the self-quarantine. The state also required restaurants to collect contact data for those dining there in case contact tracing became necessary. These requirements changed back and forth several times as infection rates from other states would rise and fall (see table 2 below).

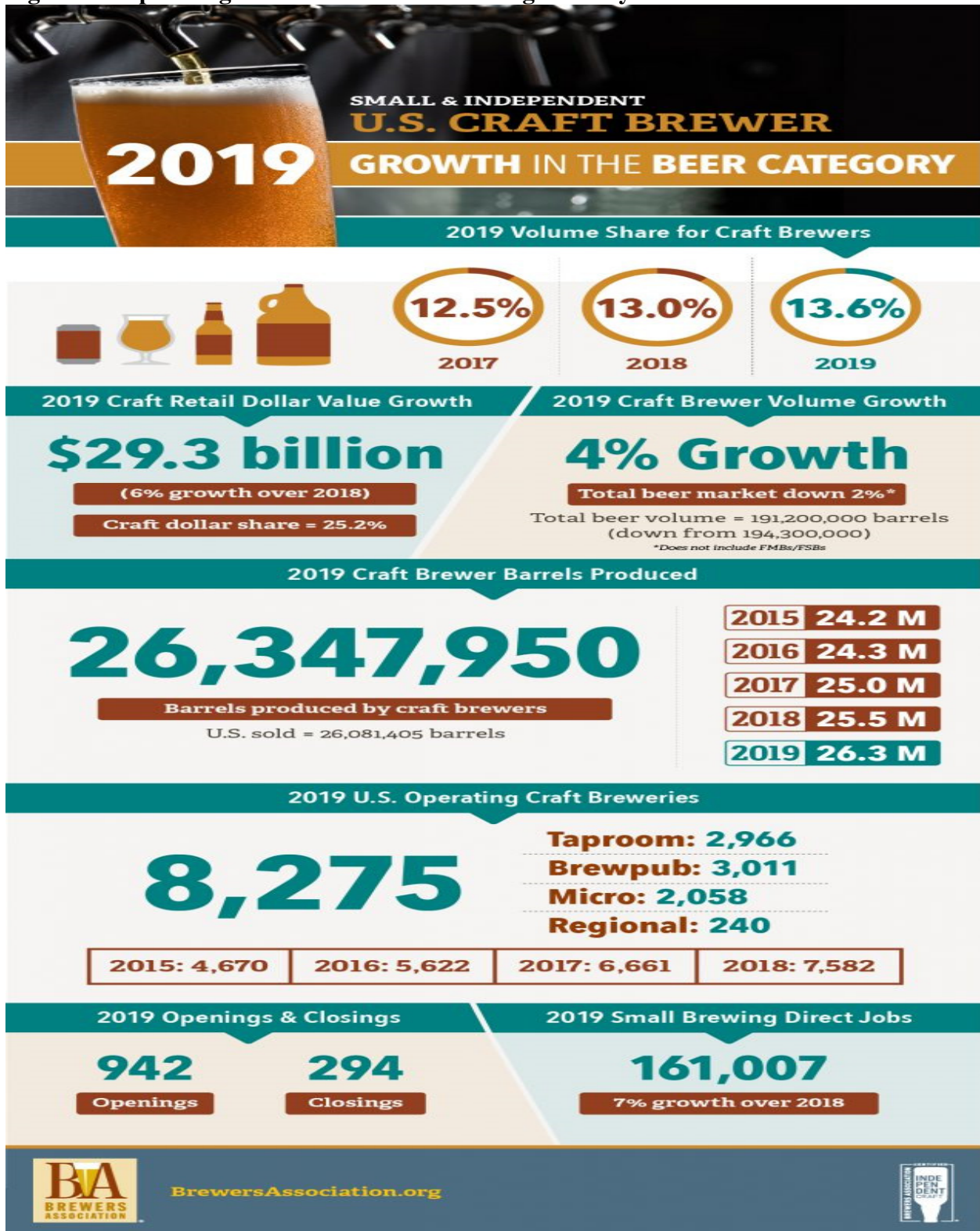
Table 2: Maine government response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Mar 18	Governor Mills issued an <u>Executive Order</u> mandating that all restaurants and bars statewide close to dine-in customers effective March 18, 2020 at 6:00 p.m. for a period of 14 days until midnight, March 31, 2020.
Mar 31	Governor Mills issued a series of substantial new mandates to protect public health and safety in the face of COVID-19, including a <u>Stay Healthy at Home directive</u> that requires people living in Maine to stay at home at all times unless for an essential job or an essential personal reason, such as obtaining food, medicine, health care, or other necessary purposes.
Apr 15	As the State continues to respond to COVID-19, Governor Mills signed a <u>proclamation extending Maine's state of civil emergency</u> for another thirty days through May 15, 2020. The original state of civil emergency was scheduled to expire tomorrow, April 15, 2020.
Apr 28	Governor Janet Mills presented her Administration's <u>plan to gradually and safely restart Maine's economy</u> . The plan, which comes as the State appears to be successfully flattening the curve, establishes four gradual stages of reopening, the first of which begins May 1st. The Governor also announced she will extend the State's stay-at-home order in the form of a new "Stay Safer at Home" Executive Order.
May 13	Governor Janet Mills signed a proclamation extending Maine's <u>state of civil emergency</u> for thirty days through June 11, 2020.
May 27	The Mills Administration announced that it is <u>postponing the full reopening of restaurants for dine-in services</u> in York, Cumberland, and Androscoggin counties. Restaurants in these counties were tentatively scheduled to reopen to dine-in services on June 1 (Stage 2) but are now restricted to reopening to outside dining service only beginning on that date in addition to continuing to provide take-away and delivery services.
June 4	The Mills Administration announced additional business re-openings under the Governor's rural reopening plan. Under the update, in 13 counties, tasting rooms and bars may open for outside service and gyms and fitness centers, nail salons, and tattoo and piercing parlors may open with added health and safety precautions beginning on Friday, June 12th. These establishments may reopen everywhere in all counties except for York, Cumberland, and Androscoggin Counties.
June 10	As the State continues to respond to COVID-19, Governor Janet Mills extended the State of Civil Emergency for thirty days through July 10, 2020.
June 22	The Mills Administration announced that it is postponing the reopening of <u>indoor service at bars</u> to protect public health given the higher risk of COVID-19 transmission in such settings.
July 8	Governor Janet Mills issued an Executive Order requiring large retail businesses, restaurants, outdoor bars, tasting rooms, and lodging establishments in Maine's

	more populous cities and coastal counties to <u>enforce the State's face covering requirement</u> . Governor Mills also extended the State of Civil Emergency for thirty days through August 6, 2020.
Sept 22	Governor Mills extended the <u>State of Civil Emergency</u> for thirty days through October 1, 2020.
Sept 30	Governor Mills extended the <u>State of Civil Emergency</u> for thirty days through October 29, 2020.
Oct 13	The Mills Administration announced that Maine will move into <u>Stage 4 of the Plan to Restart Maine's Economy</u> beginning Tuesday, October 13, 2020. Stage 4 increases limits on indoor seating to 50 percent capacity of permitted occupancy, or 100 people – whichever is less – and maintains the critical public health measures outlined in COVID-19 Prevention Checklists, such as enhanced cleaning practices and physical distancing. Today's Executive Order also further strengthens the State's face covering mandate by requiring that a broader set of entities, such as private schools and municipal buildings, ensure that employees and people in their buildings adhere to this critical health measure. The Order also expands the scope of the enforcement statewide, rather than in just Maine's coastal counties and more populous cities.
Nov 1	In response to surging cases of COVID-19 in Maine and the nation, Gov. Mills is extending funding for response efforts by municipalities and tribes; postponing the start of indoor service in bars and tasting rooms; and effective Nov. 4, returning indoor gatherings to the prior limit of 50 and ending the testing/quarantine exemption for travel to/from Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey.
Nov 19	To slow the spread of COVID-19, all outdoor and indoor amusement venues, movie theaters, performing arts venues, casinos, and businesses that provide seated food and drink service, including social clubs, restaurants, and bars and tasting rooms currently open for outdoor service, <u>will close for the night by 9:00 p.m. from November 20, 2020, through Sunday, December 6, 2020.</u>

Source: State of Maine COVID-19 19 Response Retrieved 12/04/2020 from <https://www.maine.gov/covid19/>

Figure 1: Explosive growth for the Craft Brewing industry



CHANGING RULES FOR CHANGING TIMES

Little research was available early during the pandemic and the coronavirus did not behave consistently. Some countries seemed to be hit harder than others. But even within country borders, some population demographics seemed affected much greater than other populations. For example, in the United States, racial and ethnic minority groups are found to be at much higher risk than non-minority citizens.

The Summer Session Beer Festival sponsored by the Maine Brewer's Guild scheduled for July 25 was cancelled. According to the Maine Brewer's Association in 2017, nine million tourists visiting Maine visited a Maine brewery. This accounted for one in five of all tourists visiting the state.

YANKEE INGENUITY RESPONDS

One of the first responses by many of the craft brewers was to acquire a restaurant license. As noted above, this became a challenge for many of the brewers as they were not able to simply sell the snacks and appetizers commonly offered at many of the pubs. With a restaurant license the brewers could open their pubs to 50% capacity and food sales would help offset reduced on-premises beer sales.

Like many other northern states, the Maine climate makes outdoor seating very challenging. Many tourists find outdoor seating too cold as early as late August. Many pub owners did not already have outdoor facilities and had to build theirs very quickly to take advantage of what business they could get. Some brew pubs built German style Biergartens. Others placed picnic tables outdoors with string lights and added propane heaters or outdoor fireplaces to accommodate patrons. This was often not enough to keep many tourists as customers, but locals used to Maine outdoors and consuming beverages in cold weather seemed unfazed by the colder weather.

Brewers contracted with mobile can production services to help meet production needs in the short-term. However, for the long-term, brewers would need to come up with sufficient cash or financing to purchase their own can production line or come up with an alternate solution.

KILLING MORE BUSINESSES THAN PEOPLE

The Maine population is approximately 1.35 million and there have been 281 deaths through early December 2020, which is extremely low. This number is very close to the annual mortality rate for the annual flu and pneumonia. In part, the extremely low mortality rate has caused some residents to ignore the disease potential. The growing disregard for the severity of COVID is based partly on the numbers but also on changing government requirements, "COVID fatigue", and the genuine fear of closing businesses and the resulting job losses. However, owner Rick Savage soon announced his restaurant would close again until further notice because of the state revoking the health licenses for the restaurant.

But by the end of the day Savage announced that his restaurant, Sunday River Brewing Co. in Bethel, would once again close "until further notice" after the state revoked his health licenses. Local patrons supported Savage as he defied state orders and more than 150 customers lined up to eat at the restaurant in support of his staying open. Savage even appeared on Fox News's "Tucker Carlson Tonight". By the next afternoon, the state had revoked the liquor and

health licenses for the business. Up to that time (late May) 55 people had died across the state of Maine resulting from COVID-19.

David Portnoy is the CEO/Founder of Barstool Sports, a digital media company that produces content focused on sports and pop-culture. The company also has an online store where they sell t-shirts and related sports apparel. To help bars and restaurants during the Covid pandemic, Portnoy started the Barstool Fund where people can donate funds to help keep small businesses from closing. By early 2021, the fund reached \$33 million in funds raised with more than 200 thousand supporters and had helped keep 200 small businesses from closing. *Newsweek* reports that Food Network host Guy Fieri established a relief fund raising \$21.5 million between March and August, according to a representative with The National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation told. Fieri, the TV host of *Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives*, appealed to big corporate sponsors PepsiCo, Uber Eats and Moët Hennessy USA, for financial support of his Restaurant Employee Relief Fund that he started in March 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly throughout the U.S. and around the world. The fund has assisted 43,000 restaurant workers "who have suffered financially due to the COVID-19 health and economic crisis," through \$500 grants to restaurant workers.

LOOKING AHEAD

It is difficult to predict what lays ahead for the craft brewing industry in Maine and across the country. Certainly, we must consider that another pandemic may be on the horizon. As of this writing, craft brewers anxiously await action for Congress to renew the Craft Beer Modernization and Tax Reform Act that reduces the \$18 per 31-gallon barrel to \$3.50 on the first 60,000 barrels, then \$7 per barrel for brewers that produce up to 2 million barrels annually.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) If you were Jack or Sandy, what could you do to keep your brewpub open?
- 2) Do you think Jack and Sandy should try to find another way to open the restaurant?
- 3) Should Maine brewers challenge the government shutdowns? What the pros and cons of challenging the shutdowns? If you chose to challenge the shutdown, what strategy could be effective?
- 4) Risk assessment and management is central to this case and research indicates that few small businesses do a good job in assessing and managing risk. If you were advising Jack and Sandy how might you address risk assessment and management in their business?

TEACHING NOTE

Objectives of the case:

- 1) Better prepare the student for risk management issues as they develop business plans and/or graduate to go out and manage businesses.
- 2) Help students understand the importance of preparation for uncontrollable external events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3) Help students understand the important linkage between business and public policy issues, in this case, health and safety of the consumer public.
- 4) Provide students with an opportunity to develop creative problem-solving in a business setting.

Questions for discussion

- 1) If you were Jack or Sandy, what could you do to keep your brewpub open?

There are several things Jack and Sandy can do to keep the Moose Pointe Brewpub going during the COVID pandemic. Jack and Sandy can follow the lead of the other brewpubs and begin delivering in the local area in addition to providing curbside takeout service. The brewpub also has a large porch and parking lot that can be used for outdoor serving. The parking lot area can be converted to a biergarten with a sound system and string lighting. As the building was a former hotel, there is already a kitchen which will help the brewpub to upgrade from only serving pub snacks to a restaurant serving meals. Finally, as a former hotel, there are some rooms upstairs that can be rented long-term to help increase cash flow. This will be especially helpful as all these upgrades will cost the partners more cash than what they currently have.

- 2) Do you think Jack and Sandy should try to find another way to open the restaurant?

The key to securing the restaurant license is first to be sure the premises are COVID compliant. This will require some additional costs for plexiglass shields to place between dining booths, additional signage, cleaning materials, and most importantly, extra training for all employees. As cash is often a major issue for small businesses, especially those just starting out, Jack and Sandy should seek whatever special funding there might be available through the SBA or state agencies. In addition, several groups have already established GOFUNDME accounts to assist small business owners through the COVID pandemic.

- 3) Should Maine brewers challenge the government shutdowns? What the pros and cons of challenging the shutdowns? If you chose to challenge the shutdown, what strategy could be effective?

Small business owners should only challenge shutdowns if the measures are considered extreme. Small business owners have a responsibility to follow all necessary health and safety guidelines to ensure the safety of their customers, employees, and the public. Challenging shutdowns should be coordinated through the Brewer's Guild and working through state legislatures. Challenging shutdowns as an individual business owner would not likely work and

only result in fines and potential loss of the business liquor license. An effective challenge would likely be one based on facts, rather than emotion. As the World Health Organization, Center for Disease Control, U.S. Surgeon General data becomes available, that data should be used as the basis for any appeal to loosen operating restrictions. A good public information campaign would be important to secure support from the public as well as legislators.

- 4) Risk assessment and management is central to this case and research indicates that few small businesses do a good job in assessing and managing risk. If you were advising Jack and Sandy how might you address risk assessment and management in their business?

Business owners should develop a comprehensive risk assessment of their business operation before going into business and regularly update that assessment. Risk assessment should identify categories and types of risk including financial risk, economic risk, environmental risk, weather-related risk, theft/crime risk, health and safety risk, technological risk, personnel risk, and others.

Once risk has been identified, management can take steps to mitigate risk impact. This often begins with early risk detection and preventive measures. Finally, risk remedies might include changes in internal policies and procedures and insurance claims.

EPILOGUE

At the time of this writing the COVID-19 vaccine was just approved for use. It is expected to take several months at least before enough citizens are vaccinated and the population achieves “herd immunity.” The 2020 tourist season was hard for many Maine businesses, especially those along the coast. However, by the time the 2021 tourist season began the COVID-19 vaccine became widely available to allow for full-reopening.

As of this writing, the Craft Beer Modernization and Tax Reform Act has been attached to the \$900 billion COVID relief package. The bill appears to have passed Congress and is awaiting President Trump’s signature. This will provide some breathing room for the smaller brewers to get through the business downturn resulting from the COVID pandemic. Sunday River Brewing lost their alcohol beverage license and as of this writing has not been able to secure a new license.

According to the Maine Brewer’s Guild, although several craft breweries closed during the pandemic, several new breweries have emerged to take their place.

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