

# Firms' future is not cut and dry

As the country gets ready to reopen tomorrow, small companies are trying to figure out what comes next, writes *Sandra O'Connell*

**T**opline Rogers, a hardware store in Ballymote, Co Sligo, looks much the same as it always has. Now in its sixth generation, the business – which opened in 1870 – still closes for lunch. Behind the scenes, however, Covid has transformed the enterprise.

Last year it launched an ecommerce website for consumers, mybuildingsupplies.ie. Today brothers Pádraic and Mícheal Rogers think nothing of dispatching bags of cement to Cork.

"It started in the first lockdown," Pádraic says. "People couldn't get paint and were stuck at home staring at the four walls. They found our website and started ordering it. Today we sell flooring, bathrooms, everything you need to build a house, online."

Ecommerce now accounts for 30 per cent of revenues and has expanded the Topline Rogers customer base across the country. "It's all new business," says Pádraic, who has raised staff numbers from 14 to 24 to cope with the demand.

The brothers are launching a portal aimed at professional builders, too.

"When we launch it in June, builders will be able to set up an account, do their ordering, manage their invoices and even do up quotations via our website," he says. "This is going to be the future and, for us, it's all business we didn't have before."

The "new normal" is also exercising the mind of Anne Butterly, founder of Easydry. It makes environmentally friendly disposable towels for hair and beauty salons.

She founded the business in 2003 and it grew as she explained to salon owners how many microbes live on traditional towels and how easily they can be transmitted from person to person. As no one needs persuading on that score any longer, it has opened up opportunities.

"Hygiene has become the new gold-star standard in hotels, for example. In the past people wanted big white fluffy towels," she says. "Now they want a towel no one has used before."

Patrons of a gym will be wary if they see someone sweating on a machine that has not been cleaned. "Hygiene is going to be paramount and consumers will be policing all of this now."

Hair salon owner Dylan Bradshaw is also trying to figure out what comes next, as hairdressers all over Ireland get ready to reopen tomorrow.

The most recent lockdown was the longest, and will most likely have led to permanent changes, but nothing else is so assured. "There is an element of just not knowing what the new normal entails," Bradshaw says.

His salon on South William Street in Dublin is a destination salon – half its revenues come from outside the capital. However, it is also dependent on a busy city centre, including workers in nearby office blocks, and a thriving retail scene.

However, post-Covid plans to keep cars out of Dublin city centre and increase pedestrianisation could make such a recovery even harder.

"People aren't going to spend if they have to carry shopping bags long distances because they can't drive in or because the parking is poor," he says.

The sector must also contend with a rise in in-home haircuts that became an illicit feature of the lockdowns. "The black market has been huge in our industry," Bradshaw says. As well as being in breach of public health restrictions, the practice puts law-abiding salons, who must deal with rents, insurance, rates and taxes, at an unfair disadvantage. "It has to be tackled," he says.

Reopening any business after a five-month closure is expensive. Bradshaw's own premises needed repainting but because of his status, and the fact that he has 2,000 appointments booked and ready to go, his future is bright. While the entire sector expects an early bonanza, what happens after the excitement dies down is a source of concern to others, he reckons.

"I can see many salons opening up to get money in during the first three or four weeks, but after that they don't

know if demand will last," Bradshaw says. "It's going to be tough. Businesses will close. I'm telling everyone to go in and support these businesses, because there are livelihoods at stake."

Dave McEvoy of Dmac Media, which has offices in Dublin and Sligo, spent the pandemic helping retailers to adapt to the new normal by developing ecommerce capabilities. It has seen growth of 80 per cent over the past 12 months, such is the level of demand.

Helped by the local enterprise offices' trading online voucher, worth €2,500, he reckons most retailers who needed an ecommerce website going into the pandemic now have one. "The guys who were already in a good position in relation to ecommerce prior to Covid have seen sales take off," McEvoy says.

"What we are seeing now is those guys moving up a gear."

For example, car dealers are not only taking deposits and even payments for cars online, but also enabling customers to book and manage car services over the internet. "As more businesses have come online, activity has moved to, 'How do I differentiate myself?'" he says.

For retail, the switch to online will outlast the pandemic, he says.

"Initially we will see excitement as stores reopen, but once the novelty wears off after a couple of weeks, people will realise they don't want to jump in the car to get the messages any more," says McEvoy, who believes that behaviour in the pandemic will not be unlearned. "We've also had prolonged exposure to all sorts of digital tools, from Zoom meetings to booking restaurants online."

In March last year Louise Lonergan of Lonergan Corporate Gifts reacted quickly, setting up the website healthsafetyproducts.eu, to source and supply masks and hand sanitisers to her corporate customer base. "It was one of the greatest joys of my life to be able to look after customers who had looked after me for more than 20 years," Lonergan says.

It also proved a shrewd commercial move. The new website accounted for 65 per cent of her business last year – her



best yet. Last year she took the enterprise on to the cloud, automating a range of processes, including sales. She also undertook a “lean” training initiative that leads to continuous improvement.

The new normal will bring more changes, she believes. “Pivoting is just a part of life now for small businesses,” Lonergan says. “People won’t want so many masks or hand sanitisers, but they will want workwear and antigen testing, which we also do. I’ll just have to listen very hard to the market.”

That is not going to be a problem. “My confidence has taken a huge leap over the past year. I’m not scared of what the world is going to throw at me now, because I know I’ll figure it out,” Lonergan says. “Who knows what’s next? I’m not afraid. Bring it on.”



**Pivoting is just a part of life now for small businesses**



LORRAINE O'SULLIVAN



Butterly's range of eco-friendly disposable towels are a hit with salon owners. "Hygiene has become the new gold-star standard," she says

