

A small open-air theater's digitalization and its reaction to COVID-19

The beginning

I have found my client in early February of 2020. They are a very small, but relatively long-established company, since they have been operating since 2004. Except for the summer period – when there operations are ongoing – they employ only 2 people full-time. They organize theater-plays and concerts during the weekends of July and August in a small Hungarian town in the countryside.

I worked for the company in 2015 summer, which I enjoyed very much. That is how I get to know the organizers and that is also how I noticed the lack of digitalization in their business, which could be improved easily and for a minimal cost. Therefore I offered them my services to help them in any way they like as part of my Capstone project. They accepted me both for the TMI project and for the Finance project, since, as I mentioned that there are only two of them in the company who basically do everything. They were also very open minded to hear fresh ideas from someone from a different field and who is just finishing his studies, since their business isn't changing much from year to year. That can be both positive and negative: stability and constant quality, but not enough improvements.

Work plan

Dealing with the situation caused by the pandemic was not part of the original plan. The owners however requested my assistance in trying to work out a solution for every possible scenario of the virus situation and the regulations related to that.

We begin to work together in early March, starting with the tasks we initially agreed on. Of course, when the virus hit, the priorities of the client quickly changed and our relationship evolved into a real consultancy-like relation, mostly focused on tackling the crisis.

First, let me introduce briefly the work done for the original plan and at the end add the scenarios we created as part of the risk management for the situation caused by the pandemic.

The work done and its results

The client has been in partnership with an online sales portal for 4.5 years. This relationship has been lucrative for the client, since they didn't have to deal with selling their own tickets online. The situation and also the business environment however have changed a lot since 2015. For this

reason, I compared the current partner's old offer with their new offer we asked and received from them just as well with the offer of their main and larger competitor. Based on my comparison, I found that the competitor's offer is most favorable from both a financial perspective and by comparing the number of people the two sites are able to reach. There are also issues with the reporting capabilities of the current online sales provider. It takes days to gather all the useful data from their platform. This leads us to my next point.

Even though I recommended to the client to change their partner, they might not take my advice. In case they do, that can only happen at the end of 2020, so it will be only in effect in 2021. Based on this, and to save my client from hours and days of manual work and calculations on paper, I created a macro which not only gathers all the data from the online portal but it converts, formats and separates it and also adds calculations, formulas and pivots based on the raw data. This macro was tested by the client many times and it seems to be working well.

When we hear the expression of theater or an open-air theater, we have one image in our minds. In contrast to that image, this particular open-air theater is different. I wanted to help them change or rather improve that image. After a thorough market research, I found an effective but also cost-effective way to do that. A student-led small company specialized in creating short videos for advertising would create a 3-minute promo video about this theater, showing the difference by recording the extraordinary scenery with a drone in 4K, creating a time-lapse of the sunset while the play is ongoing, cutting in all the famous actors and actresses who play there in a season with special effects and so on. This short video will almost definitely reach even the soul of everyone who watches it. I gave my detailed plan and their offer to the client for evaluation.

Understanding the constantly changing customer needs in a continuously changing world is not easy. One of the best tools to assist businesses to do so is a survey or a questionnaire. The client has already tried the paper version with negligible results. I proposed to try the electronic version. Of course, there are obstacles to do so, such as having the email addresses of all the previous guests. Besides distributing the questionnaire on social media, I proposed an incentive system to encourage customers to provide their contact details, most importantly their email addresses in a GDPR-compliant way. We have put together the most essential questions for the online survey which are indeed needed to improve or innovative the service the client provides.

The client's business does have an online presence, but its social media activity is not significant enough, only seasonal and more importantly not personal. This is in spite of the fact that the owner is a well-known and well-respected individual. For this reason, I proposed two ideas. The first one

is a very detailed social media-posting plan for the entire year, in which I created both all the draft-posts and schedules for the posts. My intention is to help the client on one hand to involve the viewers more in the theater's life by frequently asking their opinions and explaining them what is going on, and on the other hand to keep up their interest through the whole year. My other idea was that the previously mentioned famous owner should deliver personal messages in the form of short Facebook and Instagram stories in which she explains the current situation, tells about their plans and shares her own feelings and wishes. This personal touch could easily affect more people than a paid advertisement.

The client's employees have been using their own personal computers to work from. This, of course, has resulted in losing their data when the computer died. Therefore, I recommended a solution that solved that problem and also helps them in their every-day work, for example being able to work on the same document in the same time from different locations in a secure way. I recommended moving to the cloud. I compared the prices of the suppliers providing cloud solutions for small business and proposed the one I considered the best. The client accepted my advice and we set up their business account together, starting from the business emails up until their folder structure.

Reaction plans for the new situation

The last, but still most important part of my work was to advise the client in matters in relation to the COVID-19 epidemic. The client and I worked together to come up with innovative solutions to be able to operate this season. Whenever a new executive order came out, we immediately started working on the solution how to function by both keeping the guests safe and complying with the all the current regulations. During these few months, I prepared at least 15 plans, from which the client accepted 7 scenarios that can actually be executed without making a serious loss.

Lessons learnt

During these extreme times, I learned that having a great out of the box idea might not be enough to impress someone with 30 or 40 years more experience than me. I also have to be able to make these ideas feasible for the particular client and the particular situation. Furthermore, I also needed to pitch them in a way that sounds both confident and enthusiastic and in the same time tempered and sober-minded. This was not easy at first, but I managed to master it and succeeded.

