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Chamber of Commerce leader says supporting local business critical as ever this holiday season

BY ANDREW CANULETTE | STAFF WRITER

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Lacey Osborne, President and CEO of the St. Tammany Chamber of Commerce

STAFF PHOTO BY ANDREW CANULETTE

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Andrew
Canulette

Lacey Osborne has spent a couple of decades connecting business people and promoting their efforts throughout St. Tammany Parish.

Now, the president and CEO of the St. Tammany Chamber of Commerce is urging residents to buy from local merchants as the parish attempts to pull itself out of the financial difficulties brought about by the coronavirus pandemic and the emergency orders that minimized capacity at many local businesses (and completely shut down others) for several months earlier this year.

There's no better time to do that, Osborne said, than during the holiday gifting season, which provides critical income that can sustain local businesses for several months at a time.

St. Tammany Farmer Editor Andrew Canulette sat down with Osborne at the Chamber's new Slidell office recently. Following are selected excerpts from that interview.

FARMER: Where were we as a Chamber before the pandemic, maybe in February? You were a new group, but how did the Chamber have to pivot to meet the needs of its members?

OSBORNE: The St. Tammany Chamber of Commerce was born in November 2019. We had the new articles of incorporation, everything drawn up, done professionally. We became a new Chamber and we saw 2020 as what was going to be the start of three transition years, really.

We were on a new path. And when the quarantine began in March ... we realized even more change was coming. We had to cancel our business expo. We had to change all the events we planned. So we developed a knowledge of how to have virtual meetings, doing things on Zoom. And it was surprising how many people really remained engaged. We had 90% to 95% attendance at our board meetings. Sure, it was via Zoom, but people wanted to be a part. Everyone was concerned.

As the Chamber, to support business and to be a voice of business, we were used to bringing people together, but now we had to do it virtually.

FARMER: One of the Chamber's key roles is to connect people. You have meet-and-greets. You press the flesh. All of a sudden, you couldn't. How hard was that?

OSBORNE: We had webinars about staying healthy, to ask a CPA or a banker "What happens now?" We realized we had to get serious about partnering with St. Tammany Corporation and the Northshore

Community Foundation. The government programs, the CARES Act, it helped us stay on our feet. ... It was harder and it was frustrating.

Take our first big event, the legislative luncheon. We couldn't get to know our new delegation like we wanted because we couldn't go to the Capitol. Our staff was smaller and we couldn't get away. No doubt it's been a rough year, but the end is in sight. Even if it's July or December 2021, the end of the crisis is near.

FARMER: How difficult in your estimation are things right now for local businesses? How many members are really worried about what's ahead?

OSBORNE: When all this started, I must have gotten 20 immediate phone calls. People wanted to know how to pay employees. They knew they might have to shut down if they couldn't get a PPP loan. (There were people) hiding in their closet, hiding from the family, crying ... The hairdressers and the health clubs who were really struggling (because they couldn't open for a while), then you had other businesses paying their employees all the way through the quarantine.

So, there were some real differences and some very real concerns. This caused some people to be judgmental and there was some criticism. It was painful and divisive. People would get mad about

people not social distancing. People were on edge.
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But you got here to work, and you had to lead. You had to work.

I've seen some businesses close and some businesses survive. We are all ready for this over, but the mental health concern is strong. There have been some very strong people in some very weak moments.

FARMER: What's been the hardest hit area of local business?

OSBORNE: We don't have a lot of retail members, but we do have a lot of restaurants, and I've seen a lot of them struggle. The ones that have pivoted to things like curbside during this, have done well.

Retail, you think the big guys will be fine. Well, they may be OK, but they owe their banks too. The bills don't go away.

FARMER: Where does the Chamber go from here? Do you continue to rethink how things are done?

OSBORNE: All Chambers and all business organizations are going to have to do things differently, but we already were doing things differently, really. It's 2020, not 1990. ... We're helping the little guy with networking, but we're helping the big guys with their concerns, too. We

have to keep helping the business community. We
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have new leaders, the economy is rocky because of COVID. We're not the wealthiest state in the world. Groups like St. Tammany Corp., the St. Tammany Parish Tourist Commission — we need one another. The Chamber can be a convener.

FARMER: Is there assurance we can give business owners now, especially the small business owners?

OSBORNE: They have to pivot, in most cases. They have to have support and they have to make good decisions. We're here to help, but we need help, too. ... The board members that show up and participate and make decisions. We need them.

FARMER: We always hear "Shop local." How important is that right now, for people out shopping for the holidays, to purchase from local businesses? And also, how important is it to keep doing that when the holidays are over but the pandemic is still here?

OSBORNE: Get in your car, go to a store and spend money. The gift card business is critical. There are some businesses that if they don't do well with gift cards during the holidays, they're going to struggle.

People talk about shopping online (and how that helps stay safe). Well, local businesses have websites, too. And I don't know one that's going to

turn you away if you call them and ask for help.
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 purchasing something over the phone or to pick something up curbside.

But business owners have to be creative, too. I know one store owner who was calling customers, telling them what she had, what might fit and asking them to come by, taking appointments to come try something on.

There are a lot of ways you can be creative and help yourself survive. ... People are doing that. A lot of them are cooperating to help all of us pull through. ... And I find, too, that people want to help local businesses. It's a stereotype that you're going to pay more if you stay local. You can save money, and you're going to get personal service, right here at home.

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