

“We’re looking after each other”: How COVID-19 has boosted morale — and sales — at The Champagne Dame’s e-commerce business

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KYLA KIRKPATRICK, FOUNDER OF EMPEROR CHAMPAGNE AND THE CHAMPAGNE DAME. SOURCE: SUPPLIED.

As the coronavirus outbreak has enforced a hiatus on one of her businesses, Champagne entrepreneur Kyla Kirkpatrick has seen a sales boost to her second venture, and seen first-hand the power of team camaraderie in tough times.

Kirkpatrick’s flagship business, The Champagne Dame, usually has her travelling all over the world, speaking at events and running workshops as an expert on the iconic French tippie.

But as the spread of COVID-19 threw both the events and travel industries in turmoil, she’s had some time to focus on her second venture.

Launched in late 2017, Emperor Champagne is an e-commerce retailer. And over the past two months, as Aussies abide by social distancing measures, it's gone from strength to strength.

Sales for Emperor Champagne were up 200% in March, year-on-year, and it looks like April's numbers will be similar, Kirkpatrick tells *SmartCompany*.

A few weeks in April have been 400% up, compared to the same week last year, she adds.

While she was initially concerned to lose all her business from The Champagne Dame, "as it turned out, it was a blessing", Kirkpatrick says.

"It's meant that I can stop being frantically busy and stop being pulled between two businesses," she explains.

"I have the opportunity to focus with singular vision on one company."

She's also had time to get stuck into the nitty gritty of the business, and to connect with her team there.

"One of the great opportunities of the crisis is that it's given me the time to be at the coal face," the founder explains.

"I'm in the warehouse every day, stilettos and all. I'm on the forklift. I'm picking and packing orders.

"I know how my business works at a micro level now, which has been massively rewarding for me."

"We're looking after each other"

Kirkpatrick puts a big part of the business' recent success down to the strength of the team at Emperor, and the connection they have to each other and to the business.

"I love coming to the office, we've got a really good morale in the office. We drink a bottle of Champagne every day," she says.

"We play great music, we collaborate ... there's a real sense of camaraderie — we're looking after each other."

While other workplaces are seeing people working remotely and perhaps feeling disconnected from their colleagues, Emperor is, naturally, classed as an essential service. The team is allowed to work together in the office and warehouse, as long as they maintain social distancing.

And Kirkpatrick feels being able to work through the pandemic has bought the team closer together.

"You're not seeing your friends, and you're not seeing your family. But we've got each other. You can't underestimate the power of that," she explains.

"It's tightened our team and it's tightened our sense of ownership in the business."

As a leader, she's also taking the opportunity to hear what her colleagues think about the business.

"I'm really using this team. I'm letting them tell me what they think we should do," she says.

"Sometimes you're so busy that you're not listening properly, and you miss opportunities."

Kirkpatrick asked one employee what she would do if she was CEO, she explains.

"We've come up with some totally left-field ideas of how to grow the business that I wouldn't have thought of," she says.

"And you know what? We might just implement them."

"The human touch"

Ultimately, Kirkpatrick believes the COVID-19 pandemic period could have a positive lasting effect on the business. The team is bonding with each other, and they're also connecting with customers.

"When your staff care about the direction and the success of the business, they care about the customers that come forward," she explains.

"I've noticed my staff taking initiative with people, picking up conversations with customers and reaching out to them."

Kirkpatrick notes one instance, for example, where a staff member noticed someone had ordered a bottle of Champagne for someone else, and called to ask if they wanted to add a gift card.

The staff member went on to have a five-minute conversation with the customer, asking how they're coping with the social distancing restrictions, and how they were feeling.

"I've received some beautiful letters and reviews from our customers around the thought and the human touch that we're adding," she says.

"It's not just a transaction with us, it's got a lot more feeling," she adds.

"And I think that comes from the fact that our staff are also closer connected together.

"It's a very holistic circle."