

Lessons of the pandemic

Every business sector has had to adapt to the pandemic.

The various trade associations representing these sectors also had to navigate the same challenging environment, but they had a double responsibility. They had to steer their industry through the pandemic, as well.

Nurseries did fairly well after an uncertain start to the pandemic. Other economic segments weren't so fortunate. I asked four trade group leaders to reflect on the lessons they learned over the past year. All were gracious enough to share their thoughts.

Hospitality

Jason Brandt has been at the Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association (ORLA) for almost six years, following a successful 11-year run at Salem Chamber of Commerce. Needless to say, restaurants and hotels have been put through a trial by fire over the last year. No amount of training or experience could have prepared this elite CEO for the perfect storm of economic calamity that happened, and is still ongoing.

"We lose something in ourselves when our public-facing small businesses are taken away from our everyday life," Jason said. "More Oregonians now understand the value of industries like hospitality in keeping the fabric of our local economies intact. The small wins have mattered, as we have moved through a grueling year full of loss and challenge. Without a team of highly competent professionals at ORLA, it would have been near impossible to lead in the way the industry needed."

General business

As the leading business association in the state, Oregon Business & Industry (OBI) faces a great deal of pressure, even in normal times. They are often the tip of the spear for the business community in general. The past year brought a heavy dose of fear and panic for many. They needed an experienced hand at the helm of a business ship that was close to striking an economic iceberg.

Sandra McDonough, who led the Portland Business Alliance for 14 years, was drawn out of retirement to lead OBI. Sandra played an important role during the last year for all business associations. She often was

the one in direct communication with the governor on important matters.

"More than any other time in my career, the last year reinforced for me that we are never in this alone," Sandra said. "For so many months, we were all overwhelmed by the tremendous impact of the pandemic, and its cost in terms human health, shuttered businesses, and family incomes. On top of that were the other crises that hit our state — the wildfires, the long-overdue racial equity reckoning and the violent urban riots. Finding a path forward brought me closer to so many people I have worked with for a long time, and it introduced me to all kinds of new people I am lucky to know. It has reinforced the need to listen carefully and practice patience, and to remember that we are better when we are joined together looking for solutions that work even when they are not perfect. As we emerge to the other side of the pandemic, what I will feel is gratitude for the many people whose counsel and friendship got me through these very rough months."

Cattle ranching

Tammy Dennee, executive director of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association, has been in the job for almost seven months. It was a tough time to start a new job, but she brought with her experience in wheat and the dairy industry. To say the markets — both national and international — were dynamic would be an understatement.

"My professional experiences during the pandemic included an unscheduled job change which catapulted me into a very complex organization and needing to set a clear direction," Tammy said. "The physical office had been closed for months, and the volunteer board president was attempting to provide guidance to the staff, who was basically treading water. Six months into my new role, as I reflect, I realize the pandemic restrictions allowed me the opportunity to fully comprehend the operational side of the association. There are many of my board members whom I have only seen on a screen or heard on a conference call. I am looking forward to meeting them in person."

General agriculture

Dave Dillon, executive vice president of



Jeff Stone
OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

the Oregon Farm Bureau, is the dean of the ag trade group executives, and professional leader of the largest general farm association in Oregon. With almost 19 years in the industry, he is well known to be of keen mind and underappreciated for his strategic vision. He also happens to be one of my closest friends. There was nobody I learned from and leaned on more during the pandemic than Dave.

"Like all big, unexpected disruptions, the pandemic has been a chance to really look at 'normal' and question it," Dave said. "Like everyone else, it has let us see the possibilities of remote connection with others. It has also shown us very clearly some of the limits of gathering electronically. For the legislative process, the lack of in-person access to elected leaders, their staffs, and others in the advocacy arena has been disastrous in my view. Our board went a full year between in-person meetings. Losing that face-to-face presence and the time during breaks or before or after the business of the meeting was much more impactful than I had anticipated. I would close by celebrating the collaboration and mutual support our various associations have achieved through COVID-19. The ag family of member organizations was close before, and we are much closer now because our response to this pandemic. And we're all better for that closeness."

A year that defined us all

My fellow execs have a sole mission to protect the industries they serve. For me, true measure of someone's value is whether you would want them in a fox-hole with you in battle. For each of these, my answer is a resounding yes. ☺