

Together we grow stronger

THE FUTURE OF BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT



North East England
Chamber of Commerce

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Stuart Miller

Chief customer officer, Newcastle Building Society

Foreword

In February 2020, Newcastle Building Society opened two new community branches in the rural towns of Wooler, Northumberland and Hawes, North Yorkshire. The move attracted national attention – reversing a trend of UK financial institutions abandoning our high streets. But by investing in their branch network, the Society was fulfilling a commitment to maintain and grow access to face-to-face financial services.

Less than a month later, the UK was plunged into lockdown as the COVID pandemic changed lives overnight. You would expect an organisation so committed to our high streets to find lockdown impossible – with hospitality and retail businesses closed, town centres deserted and stay-at-home orders in place, how would face-to-face service cope in a world of social distancing?

However, as a provider of essential services, the Society's branch network remained open throughout the pandemic, and colleagues were quick to adapt to a new way of working to serve customers safely.

Customers' access to cash was protected via a new partnership it created with the Post Office to provide local cash access to vulnerable customers in the event of an unavoidable branch closure.

Branches were completely re-organised, with screens, face masks, hand sanitiser and hourly cleaning routines meaning that they could stay open for those customers who needed access to this essential service. Contactless technology is now being deployed in branches to reduce the handling of cash.

For those that could not get into the branch new processes were created, with services offered by phone, video or post depending on the individual circumstances of each customer.

The Society invested heavily in developing a new 'localised' website which uniquely allows visitors to tailor their content to their local branch and area. And to help customers easily find relevant information online, QR codes were added to colleagues' business cards.

Colleagues even found new ways to volunteer in their communities. With the help of an app they were able to support vulnerable people remotely or undertake Covid safe tasks such as gardening or dog walking for people who could not leave their homes.

The pandemic has reminded all of us of the value of connection and community. The Society was lucky that as an organisation with these values at our heart we were well placed to adapt to our customers' changing needs. We were by no means the only organisation to grapple with those changes – our high street neighbours were forced to change how they welcomed customers, and so too our colleagues in the wider business community changed how they interacted with clients. When faced with rapid change like this, it's important to work together and learn from each other.

That's why we've been delighted to work with the Chamber on this report, which brings together some of the best North East thinking on the future of business development, as well as case studies of businesses like ours who've made those changes.



The context

Freya Thompson, knowledge and research executive at the Chamber

The COVID-19 pandemic was particularly tough for business development.

For many businesses, their business development, sales, and marketing roles were the first to be put through furlough or redundancy and, as a result, many businesses have had to change the way they work.

A January 2021 survey by Accenture that covered 4051 executives in 13 countries and 19 industries showed that COVID-19 significantly slowed down companies' growth prospects.¹

Throughout the pandemic, most sectors experienced a low demand as customers looked for something different, such as fully remote services, things that make you better equipped for home working, and products that are immune-boosting.

Just as demand changed, so too did the duties

of some business development managers – often to a focus on existing clients and deepening those relationships, sometimes through new methods.

“Zoom calls became the norm, texting and social media became more prominent.”

Of course, businesses had to adapt to a virtual environment and a remote workforce, which sped up the digitisation process. Zoom calls became the norm, texting and social media became more prominent, cold calling became more difficult because offices were closed, and conferences were cancelled or forced to shift online. An online personal brand also became more important than ever, as photographer Chris Owens will explain later in this report.

Many felt the urge to sell via online channels, as it was frequently one of the only avenues left available, especially for B2C firms. Some of our

case studies, such as Tall Tales Mysteries and Uptivity Apps had great success with this, but it wasn't necessarily always the best choice, with research from Madrid-based academics Gupta and Rubalcaba labelling selling via online channels as a mere myth of how to succeed in the COVID-19 era. An example they gave was UK-based start-up HOOP, a leisure and entertainment application that allowed parents to book activities for their kids in nearby locations, who added a new feature offering online activities for children. This did not result in any sales, and the start-up announced their exit.²

“Businesses started getting to know their clients on a more personal level, in a way they couldn't have prior to the pandemic.”

Not only has the format in which we try to contact and sell to clients changed, but also the way in which clients are spoken and sold to. Recruitment agency GSR2R, for instance, published a piece on how successful recruiters have had to adapt their business development strategies since the pandemic³ and stated that, in the current climate, you need to have varied and wide-ranging conversations and be flexible, considerate, and sympathetic. They say that the time for transactional selling is over and it should be all about the consultative approach – building rapport and connection, working closely with clients and candidates, and offering trust and compassion and that the recruiters that do this will be the ones who enjoy continued success. This is mirrored in our case studies, with razorblue noting that they put additional focus on building stronger relationships with their clients, and Newcastle Building Society stating that they made thousands of outbound phone calls to check in on their customers for a friendly chat when not many of them were leaving their homes. Overall, businesses started getting to know their clients on a more personal level in a way they couldn't have prior to the pandemic, and as Di Keller of Karbon Homes will explain later in this report, the relationships between people and the businesses we work for is becoming

an increasingly important aspect of business development.

There was even greater collaboration among rival companies in order to work towards common goals, with a business in a US study of innovation during the pandemic⁴ saying “We aren't just selling our services anymore. There was a crisis that we had to help businesses through and work together and collaborate because of the urgency.”

Although the recovery from the pandemic continues to be long and arduous for businesses, much is returning to normal, or at least, a new normal.

A report by the Data & Marketing Association (DMA) last year found that while 70% of businesses were still being negatively impacted, 63% were experiencing signs of recovery. In addition, they found that 47% of businesses expected an increase in their marketing budget⁵ after the biggest recorded drop (-50.7%) in 2020,⁶ including a £1.8 billion decline in ad spend in the UK,⁷ in which no company, regardless of size or industry, is said to have been left unscathed. Most sectors were able to recover their pre-covid advertising investments in 2020 and the end of 2021 saw almost the strongest ad spend growth since 2019 according to the IPA.⁸

Although marketing investments are returning, the marketing channel mix has transformed. 44% of B2B marketers have ‘completely changed’ their marketing channel mix since the pandemic began, and 45% have ‘somewhat changed’ their mix, leaving just 11% of B2B marketers’ strategies unaffected.⁹

While UK ad spend was predicted to be up 30% from 2020¹⁰ in 2021, UK digital ad spend in particular was confirmed to be up 49% (making up 40.7% of UK marketing budgets)¹¹ with mobile ad spend up 75%.¹² This led IAB UK's CEO, John Maw, to state that we saw “three years of change take place in just three months” and that advertisers have “adopted a more digital-heavy strategy as it was the medium least impacted by lockdowns”.¹³

91% of marketing organisations now use social media as part of their mix, tying with digital ads as the most commonly used channel across the sector.¹⁴ Video and audio have also become some of the most frequently used channels, with these formats having gained extra momentum since the pandemic began. People spend more time in-app, suggesting that habits formed during prolonged periods of lockdown in 2020 have stuck.

“UK digital ad spend is up 49%, with mobile ad spend up 75%.”

The marketing mix is not the only aspect of business development that has transformed. The majority of businesses had to rethink the way they operate and get creative to engage with their, in some cases entirely remote, workforce and invent new ways to serve their clients, which promoted innovation. So, while it has been a negative experience for many businesses, COVID-19 has apparently also been the shake-up that some sectors have needed for some time.

Brendan Nelson, General Manager of LexisNexis Software Solutions, has stated that the COVID-19 pandemic “exposed business development and marketing strengths and weaknesses across every industry” but that this also allows us to see where to make improvements, particularly regarding technology.¹⁵

One technological innovation is that 97% of event marketers believe hybrid events

are the future, and that, going forward, the most rewarding events will have a virtual component.¹⁶ Hybrid events can mean less worries about capacity or changing health regulations, but it’s said that in-person events won’t go out of style, an opinion shared by Jeni Smith of NetKno in her contribution to this report.

Something that also became virtual were trade missions, as Jack Simpson of the Chamber will talk about in his piece later in this report. One of the greatest tools for penetrating markets, trade missions became the sending of samples overseas, therefore bringing markets and contracts to the comfort of our own homes.

Overall, with the last two examples, the fact that many of us are no longer constrained by our locations is the key. Perhaps the most critical innovation catalysed by the pandemic, increased digitisation allowing more of us to work remotely, is sometimes viewed as a risk to businesses in the North East, which may struggle to compete with the salaries offered by rival businesses in more affluent parts of the country or even abroad. The broadening pool of clients, however, with 46% of media, marketing, and advertising freelancers in the UK saying that they are no longer constrained by the location of clients and can now work for companies that are based overseas,¹⁷ and the ability for businesses like our case study Tall Tales Mysteries to reach customers all over the world, indicates that flexible location will be a mainstay the future of business development.



The value of networking

Jeni Smith, founder and networking strategist at NetKno

We buy from the people we know, like and trust, it's simply human nature. But the way in which we build and nurture our networks has changed dramatically over the last couple of decades, and even more so during the last eighteen months. Initially with the introduction of social media where we're able to organise our networks and communicate with them regularly, nurturing the relationships we've built in the real world, digitally.

More recently, as the global pandemic hit and our ability to network traditionally was literally taken away overnight, we of course turned to technology to help us connect with others. The adoption of technology for networking activities during lockdown has had a huge impact on the way we build and manage relationships within our networks. The time efficiency of attending online events, and the elimination of geographic boundaries means

we're able to network with people all over the world, instantly, from the comfort of our home offices.

Pre-lockdown, if you wanted to build relationships in new cities, you'd have to travel there to attend events and meetings. Now that we're all comfortable with the concept of remote networking that's no longer the case – business development activities can begin before you even set foot in a new city, county, or country for that matter. The world just got a whole lot smaller, and networking just got a whole lot more efficient.

That doesn't mean to say that remote networking is the future of networking.

“Deeper relationships form faster by spending time in each other's presence.”

The issue with building relationships purely online is that there's always going to be something missing. I often joke and say when you meet someone online you never know how tall they are or what they smell like. I'm not saying you should go around smelling people at networking events, what I mean is that for us to form deep and meaningful connections with other humans we need to be in the same room as them. We're multi-sensory beings, so knowing what someone smells like and shaking their hand helps us connect, form memories, and even releases oxytocin which chemically creates deeper connections. Spending time with someone means we're able to get a complete picture of who they are so we can build trust, a key component in any personal or professional relationship.

That's the difference between remote and in-person networking activities: deeper relationships formed faster by spending time in each other's presence. Although you can connect with a high volume of people via remote events, if you're going for quality over quantity then in-person always wins.

Since the pandemic began and we've embraced remote events, the number of opportunities available to us has increased dramatically. We suddenly have access to the whole world for networking and greater choice means a greater requirement for strategy. Similarly, the rise of remote events has really highlighted the time investment required for in-person networking, and therefore we're being more particular about which events we chose to attend. And rightly so – networking is an investment, and just like any other form of business development, it should be approached strategically to ensure objectives are met and return on investment optimised.

Post-pandemic networking is a very different place: a much bigger, more efficient, strategic, and yet more human place I'd hope. Being separated for so long has really highlighted the importance of connection, and not just for business development purposes but also for support, knowledge transfer, innovation,

career progression, personal development, communication skills, and so much more. The beauty now is that we have a choice. People who may have historically shied away from in-person events or found them inaccessible can now network comfortably online opening a world of possibilities and connections.

Moving forward I think it's important that people start thinking more strategically about their approach to networking, utilising remote events for volume and geographic variety whilst still attending in-person events to form and nurture more meaningful connections. The beauty of strategy is that it empowers you to be selective about the events you invest your time and resources into whilst achieving your business development goals.

To help ensure you're improving your return on investment from networking activities start by addressing your networking objectives: what do you want to achieve from building a network, and who are the people that can help you achieve those goals? Once you know who you need to meet, adopting a strategic approach becomes a whole lot easier; simply start attending the events, in person and/or online, that your target markets will be attracted to. The theme or topic of an event is always a great indication of who the delegates will be.

“Start by addressing your networking objectives: what do you want to achieve from building a network, and who are the people that can help you achieve those goals?”

Putting in the groundwork by researching delegates and pre-arranging meetings within events allows you to be more efficient with your time. As does inviting people already in your network to attend events you're going to so you can catch up before, during or after. Remember: networking isn't just about meeting new people, it's about nurturing the relationships you already have.



Public sector procurement and business growth

Tim Ward, co-founder at Opportuni

Last year, when the “Build Back Better” initiative was announced, the government outlined several schemes to give small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) the tools to grow, upskill, and boost productivity following the hit they had taken throughout the pandemic.

The government's focus on supporting SMEs post-pandemic comes with good reason. SMEs are the backbone of the UK economy, accounting for 99.9% of the total business population in Britain, as well as providing over half of the total turnover within the private sector and 61% of total employment. Not to mention, the benefits of working together are plentiful for both the private sector and SMEs alike.

At the national level, when SMEs are given

the opportunity to work with the public sector, it generates wealth, creates jobs, drives innovation, and creates a vast array of economic and social benefits. At a local level, SMEs provide employment for their communities to ensure happy and healthy local economies, as well as breathe life into local communities through the high street or even through their local pubs and restaurants.

“The government has promised that for every £3 spent on public procurement, £1 of this will be spent through SMEs.”

After the economic tragedy that was Covid-19, the public sector is keen to work with SMEs so that our national and local economies can

build back better and stronger than ever. For SMEs looking to win public sector work, there has never been a better time to take the leap! Last year alone, the government pledged to spend £88 billion through SMEs. The government promised that, by March of 2022, for every £3 spent on public procurement, £1 of this will be spent through SMEs.

The public sector makes for an excellent client for SMEs as it offers them something that the private sector simply cannot: guaranteed security. No matter what the economic situation is, our schools, hospitals, and public buildings are never going to go bust. Post pandemic, SMEs can rely on public bodies as a stable way to build their business recovery around. As well as long-term contracts and stability, the public sector has excellent payment terms, guaranteeing that all their suppliers be paid 100% of what they're owed within 30 days. Again, this is all done with the greater good of the economy in mind. When businesses are paid on time, it helps to support the supplier's cash flow, business performance, and overall productivity.

Looking forward, there is still much to be done to open up public procurement to SMEs in a way that is accessible for all business sizes. However, with a greater willingness than ever before to empower local businesses to work with the public sector, the post-covid era is looking bright for SME and public sector collaboration.

Top Tips

Finding the right opportunities:

1. Consider suitability – can you meet the minimum requirements? What do your competitors offer?
2. Establish capability – do you have the staff and resources to complete the project on time? Do you have the financial capability to meet cash flow obligations?
3. Consider your long term strategy – pick projects that mirror where you want the business to be long term and helps you meet your goals

Winning bids:

1. Know your deadlines – leave sufficient time before the final date to get your bid together
2. Assess and digest – take time to digest the project and what it entails before leaping into preparing your bid
3. Do your research – understand what the buyer usually looks for and what they value, and research your competitors too
4. Think ABC, Accurate, Brief and Concise – be specific, avoid generic 'fluff' and get to the hard facts and figures
5. Proofread – don't ruin a strong bid with typos or poor spelling and grammar



The importance of personal brand

Christopher Owens

My background is in portrait photography, starting out I spent my 20's cutting my teeth photographing bands and musicians for record labels and working for independent publications. I earned a reputation for and wealth of experience in photographing high profile business people for prominent editorial business titles as I progressed my career and I now primarily work with B2B clients and on commercial briefs both directly with companies and also via agencies. Portraiture remains at the centre of my practice, I'm interested in finding out about people's lives and what makes them tick, which I find enables me to portray a more 'authentic' view of a person, rather than preconceived ideas people may have of a particular industry.

“All the firms I now work with want to show personality over a professional façade.”

Years ago, when just beginning to work with professional service clients I recall there being so many perceived 'rules' surrounding what their imagery should look and feel like. For example, every law professional I was commissioned to shoot wanted to look very stern, and be photographed in front of lots of legal books in an attempt to look as intimidating as possible. Perhaps due to my editorial background, rather than trying to play up to stereotypes, I've always encouraged people to try to think about the intended audience of the picture. Staying with the example of the legal sector, with solicitors, more often than not, the intended audience is actually potential clients, who are looking for someone they can relate to on a human level, not a brick wall of legal stoicism. There's been a massive shift over the past 12 years or so, however, in that all the firms I now work with want to show personality over this professional façade. The importance of how people are represented, both in the imagery of themselves

and their company brand, has become more important than ever, and this often involves appearing relatable to your client base.

When a company comes to me with a photographic commission, I act as a consultant to find out how they intend to use the pictures, be that editorially, socials, in advertisements or across the business website and PR materials. After I establish the scope and lifespan of the images, I find out how I can incorporate the company branding into the image visually, by using certain colours or a particular setting, or by channelling the brand's tone of voice. I increasingly find clients want me to challenge to boundaries constructed over a period of time in their industry to create imagery that goes beyond the reach they have typically had. Feedback on this approach has indicated that it assists firms tapping into and appealing to a broader or different demographic than they have historically connected and done business with.

Increasingly, individuals are coming to me looking to develop their own personal brand in order to advance their careers. What could be confused as ego, or something frivolous, is in fact a new and very effective form of business development. Many of these individuals are graduates in their first job. They are part of the digital native generation, for whom being photographed is simply part of their life. Since they use it to harness their personal brand socially, why would they not apply that same skill set that they have acquired to their professional life also? I take a very similar approach to photographing these individuals as I do corporate clients and it's important to me to understand the goal they want to achieve, be it a promotion, a profile to a new venture or to establish an authoritative voice within their field and network. This is also true of companies and organisations that enable and encourage employees by equipping them with quality headshots and personal branding imagery consistent with that of the group to become ambassadors for the business brand via their individual socials and within their networks.

“People with a strong personal brand were really valued by their audiences more than ever.”

There used to be this idea that you almost had to acquire the right to be photographed – to have achieved something of note. Rather than looking at being photographed as an end goal, however, it is increasingly becoming a means to that end. This was particularly apparent at the beginning of the pandemic, when everyone flocked to online spaces instead of meeting in person. I noticed very quickly that the people who had a strong existing personal brand were really valued by their audiences more than ever and became the thought leaders on the issues of the day. People were engaging with them and therefore expanding their reach to potential clients. It is business development in a way that engenders trust and provides value to the audience. When the audience is invested in the brand be it a company or an individual through engaging content the buying decision becomes a smaller step for them to take.

The key to a strong personal brand is a resource of images that are suitable for different moods, subjects and contexts, and variations of each of those but speak the same visual language. A coherent library of photographs that are in tune with your personal brand will not only allow people to identify you right away, but also encourage them to engage with new content, which is a lot more effective when you aren't using the same photograph again and again. This will help develop confidence and trust in the content you are providing online. The images should also genuinely represent you and have some longevity. Personality is key, in the same way you remember and perhaps gravitate towards someone who speaks with confidence, or has a distinctive style at an in person networking event the same is true online. It sparks a curiosity to find out more about the individual, the knowledge, skills and value they can provide to a network.

A cautionary word of advice is that personal branding is a double-edged sword. Just simply getting lots of photography done isn't going to immediately grow your business, in fact, if you get the wrong photography done, it can be really damaging. It's important to choose a photographer that understands the tone of 'the brand' and what it stands for. Equally, be open to having conventional wisdom of your industry or sector challenged slightly by someone looking at it with fresh eyes, a great photographer can navigate those visual tropes to present a new or alternative perspective.

“The key to a strong personal brand is a resource of images that are suitable for different moods, subjects and contexts.”

I felt that I was well placed to help with producing these libraries of images, so I started doing studio sessions for that purpose. I tried to make them accessible not only to company owners and directors, but graduates too. I packaged them up in the form of a 'studio day', in which individuals could come in for just an hour to get a start on their personal branding, or a whole company could get their headshots done for their website within half a day at an accessible price point. It isn't something that is necessarily boxed off with one shoot. Like any form of business development it is something to build on and develop as a resource and it should adapt in line with new challenges

and objectives in order to help grow your personal brand. I'm regularly told that it is the best investment my clients have made in themselves.

The studio can be quite an intimidating place if it's your first time in an environment like that and clients can feel quite out of their comfort zone. To help people relax, I try to be very open with my own personality because, as humans, we reflect the behaviour that's in front of us. I also talk to them about their life and work to establish a common ground or shared experience which I can then use as the base of or relationship for the duration of the shoot. If someone is particularly nervous, I avoid asking them to pose in very specific or unnatural ways and instead watch their own mannerisms and ask them to revisit certain ones. At the heart of it the shoot should be a fun and enjoyable experience, I want people to leave feeling better about being photographed than they did walking in. I'm super aware that people are placing themselves in my hands and sometimes revealing part of their personality they wouldn't usually, it's an incredible amount of trust which I try not to underestimate. This in mind, my goal is to create a safe and collaborative space where creativity and self expression is encouraged, there is no right or wrong but simply ideas we try - we pursue, build upon and develop the things that look and feel the right match to resonate with our objectives and discard that which doesn't 'click'.



Business development, diversity and inclusion

Di Keller, strategic equality, diversity and inclusion lead at Karbon Homes

Karbon Homes' strategic equality, diversity and inclusion lead, Di Keller, discusses the growing importance of people's relationships with the businesses they work with or buy from. There's a far sharper lens on how you conduct yourself, and businesses have standards to live up to in order to gain support and build a positive reputation. There's therefore no doubt that equality, diversity and inclusion have become an essential part of business development, and they are poised to grow even more important in the future.

The past two years have seen dramatic changes in society, bringing into the spotlight some of the inequalities that have been in existence for decades. In particular, the murder of George Floyd and the resulting Black Lives Matter protests have advanced the conversation about ethnicity in the same

way that the #MeToo movement raised the profile of sexual harassment. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new ways of working for many, while also highlighting the plight of inequalities. Those in lower-paid jobs have been more at risk of furlough or job loss, women have been impacted more than men regarding employment, and those already vulnerable or from our ethnically diverse communities have been disproportionately affected from a health perspective.

As a society, we are becoming more diverse and more aware of diversity. That includes our customers and our colleagues. If you haven't got diversity and inclusion in your business strategy, then you are missing out on a golden opportunity, and it is those who embrace this opportunity that will see success in the future of business development.

Financial

The financial benefits of diversity and inclusion have been long discussed, since the publication of McKinsey's 'Diversity Matters' in 2015, which showed that businesses that are more diverse have demonstrated improvements on the bottom line.

"Diversity brings discussion, challenge and ultimately innovation."

So why does it make a difference? Diversity brings discussion, challenge, and ultimately from that, innovation. For example, people that think differently, have different cultural experiences, and different abilities, will all view a challenge in different ways, as opposed to a group of people that have had a similar path of education, live in a similar area, and are of the same gender. It's not always easy to see when you're in the situation, as those in homogenous groups will all agree with each other and therefore believe they have a great solution.

A report by Lord Davies in 2015 endorsed this approach to diverse thinking by calling for businesses to increase the number of women on boards. Having diversity in senior roles improves decision-making. In previous generations, the societal norms of men going out to work and women staying at home with the family have created a pattern of male leadership teams. When women become leaders and part of those teams, they provide a different set of skills, perspectives, and, importantly, structural and cultural differences that drive effective solutions.

Reputational

The potential damage to the reputation of a business can also have a financial impact, whether that is from loss of business if your products or services are non-inclusive, or, when a business gets it really wrong, legal implications, costs of tribunals, and attention-grabbing headlines where organisations have treated either a customer or colleague in the wrong way. Some of the leading names in fashion and beauty have suffered extreme fallout from their intercultural incompetence over recent years. Having more diverse

teams involved in their marketing may have avoided or minimised the risks. This isn't just about global companies - our own region is multicultural, so this needs to be a consideration.

A poor reputation often correlates with increased costs for hiring and retention, which impacts operating margins and prevents higher returns.

Looking after your reputation as a business isn't about ticking boxes or being politically correct. As awareness is raised in society and knowledge increases throughout the generations, businesses have to be aware of the complexities that diversity can bring, and that doing the right thing makes good business sense.

People-focussed

Our communities and business users are becoming more diverse. If businesses continue to work in the way they always have, their products and services will become less relevant, and leave the door open for more future-focussed businesses to accelerate and develop. Understanding the profile of your customer will help you to develop your products and services and make you stand out from the competitors and win market share. Creating a product or service that is mindful of the customer will bring loyalty from your customer base, improve your reputation, and, ultimately, the bottom line. We are starting to see more organisations have a person-centric approach to their products and business development as opposed to chasing the sales revenue in isolation.

A great example of this is shared in the book *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Design for Men*. Some of the examples in the book demonstrate that not considering diversity actually costs lives. For example, the research in the book by Caroline Criado Perez argues that women are 17% more likely to die in car crashes than men. This is because the passenger seat is the only seat that is commonly tested with a female crash-test dummy, with the male crash-test dummy still being the standard for the driver's seat.

This isn't just limited to gender, there are as many examples for those who fall into the minority groups in some way.

Talent pool

And, last but not least, if you are successful as a business, demonstrating diversity in your leadership, improving your reputation, and being people-centric in your products and services, people will want to work for you and stay loyal.

Job site Glassdoor report that a diverse workforce is an important factor for 76% of job seekers and employees when evaluating companies and job offers.

The headlines of talent and skills shortages and the great resignation have been all too familiar since the pandemic. People are reviewing who they work for and are wanting more from their job in terms of flexibility, security, and work-life balance. We have new jobs and industries being created, for example, the Net Zero Strategy claims it will support up to 440,000 jobs by 2030, but achieving this depends on having a skilled green workforce in the economy to deliver these. M15 are now looking

to tech geniuses to help them with their cyber security. Businesses that are forward-thinking and using skills programmes to develop their future workforce are building skills from within rather than waiting for someone to be ready now. This isn't the only talent we have been missing out on, however. For years, the biased approach to our recruitment, terms, conditions and working practices have excluded so many people, but the flexibility we have seen during the pandemic has highlighted how successful organisations can be with flexible approaches to working. People do not need to be based in an office or constantly on the road to do business; they can do good business from a place that works for them.

“A diverse workforce is an important factor for 76% of job seekers and employees.”

Diverse businesses are better places to work; they make better decisions, have a more positive profile in the community, and earn greater respect in the marketplace. These and other factors generally result in greater financial returns. Having a diverse and inclusive business makes good business sense.



Business development in international markets

Jack Simpson, international services executive at the Chamber

The pandemic had significant repercussions for international trade. International trade is based on travel, shipping and, crucially, cross border movements of goods, so when the pandemic threatened to close borders, international trade was flipped on its head.

However, through out the pandemic, we have seen an adaptation of business practices, trade processes and attitudes in global thinking in response to the pandemic, with new ways of working as we recover.

Trade missions are one of the greatest tools in penetrating markets, and exposing businesses to new opportunities, but they suffered greatly in the immediate shock of the pandemic.

The answer was found in virtual trade missions, bringing markets and contacts to the comfort of our own office or homes. Virtual missions

allowed businesses to take part in a series of knowledge seminars, meet the buyer events and hear of opportunities or support available to them.

The most unique series was conducted for Gulf Food, where members remained at home due to travel guidance, but shipped food samples to potential customers in Dubai, and could arrange 1-1 calls with the customers to describe or pitch their product as they sampled it.

A digital marketing agency found great success through virtual missions. The company said they just didn't have the time or resource to attend a traditional, physical, trade mission, but the virtual programme removed access barriers, and created a level playing field for smaller companies to access opportunities.

From this basis, and with DIT support, they have now signed agreements from Dubai to Indonesia, and expanding their horizons further through this digital adaptation.

“We can adapt virtual elements to support trade in a post pandemic world.”

There is, of course, no replacement for face to face relationships, holding products in your hands, or experiencing new markets and cultures first hand. However, we can adapt virtual elements to support trade in a post pandemic world.

The Chamber itself has adapted to a new virtual way of work and support. Throughout the pandemic, traders dealt with tightening borders, UK-EU Exit and ongoing supply restrictions. By utilising our Chamber network overseas, we were able to source and host contacts online to deliver insight or 1-1 support for businesses tackling trade challenges.

In one case, an education member joined our briefing of the Australian Trade Agreement, with BCC Australia, and through them found ways to establish presence and benefit from both the agreement and Chamber's contacts.

With the advent of virtual platforms, in market specialists can prepare would be exporters for key challenges, cultural norms or guidance before visiting clients overseas. Businesses benefit from a reduced burden or risk and confidence knowing how to present

themselves and products, as well as the next steps to take when completing a sale.

Cultural aspects, however, do come into play here. Various members commented on Japanese clients more hesitant to conduct business virtually or in South America where business partners wanted to shake on deals. This is not to say business to these areas stopped, but certainly delayed the progress of new trade.

Supporting international traders has been streamlined. In the wake of the EU Exit, the Chamber developed a virtual network of specialists and overseas Chambers to support members both at home and in overseas markets.

The advent of online and virtual platforms opened access to new contacts, and forcibly broke perceptions of online work and collaboration. This was spearheaded through the Chamber's Service Desk. A collective platform regional business can contact (at global@neechamber.co.uk), and receive relevant guidance, support, or if necessary access to a specialist

Customs processes have also undergone a transformation. Some markets required “wet” stamping of documentation, ink on paper, where as many modern economies have adopted digital signature platforms. COVID concerns thrust most of these “wet” processors into the modern era, and while some have reverted back to wet stamping, others, like Switzerland have adopted the digital process.

Case studies

Newcastle Building Society

Recognising that many of its customers were shielding or reluctant to venture out, Newcastle Building Society colleagues took to the phones making thousands of outbound phone calls to check in on their customers and offer a friendly chat.

The need for financial advice increased through the pandemic and whilst face-to-face advice sessions were reduced, the introduction of video and phone meetings ensured ongoing support for customers and for some it has become a preferred way to keep in touch.

Prior to the pandemic, the Society's team of business development managers typically spent five days a week on the road visiting mortgage brokers around the UK. They have now adopted a hybrid model of digitally enabled home and field-based working which facilitates more new business appointments and by reducing the time spent travelling, provides an even higher quality response to brokers.

Like most organisations, Newcastle Building Society has had to adapt and change its approach due to the unique challenges presented by the pandemic. 2021 saw the Society achieve its best ever customer satisfaction score of 96%, thanks in part to many of those new practices, partnerships and clever uses of technology.

Its latest announcement – an innovative partnership with shared banking fintech, OneBanks Hub, and global leaders in cash automation, GLORY -promises to bring local banking back to the high street, supporting digital inclusion and a brighter future for high streets and communities.



Ash Nehmet, Uptivity Apps

We at Uptivity Apps build productivity subscription software (i.e no upfront costs). Even before the pandemic, we were still finessing a sales approach of going to as many trade shows as possible and trying to meet every exhibitor and visitor. Gulf foods 2020 in Dubai was the last one visited.

Then lockdown happened. First, there was a lot of sitting around and head-scratching. Then phone calls started from panicking brick & mortar businesses because of no on-line sales. We stopped the head-scratching and dusted off a half-developed eCommerce platform sitting on the hard drive. A basic version of JustSell was born shortly afterwards.

Now, 20 months later, JustSell has a customer app, stock-adding app, a sales rep app, B2B section, an appointment booking part and industry-specific web templates. Its B2B feature has attracted a new sales model; reseller partnerships.

A bigger software company catering mainly to builders merchants wanted to partner and resell JustSell to their customers. This is proving to be a big success so we're now looking for more partners.

The pandemic has left us with a Shopify-alternative in JustSell, a new sales model and much more shoe leather.



Sara West, Tall Tales Mysteries

Our online murder mysteries began in early 2020 when we were approached by another business to supply an online murder mystery for them. With about two weeks to work out how we jumped on to Zoom and delivered our most popular plot Murder & Sparkling Wine.

From there we opened up events, selling tickets and attracting people from around the world to our virtual murder mysteries. We had to cap ticket sales to make sure everyone had plenty of interaction with our suspects, discovered how to use breakout rooms and all sorts of Zoom features. There were weeks when we had four or five shows and over Christmas even days with up to seven shows!

Working online allowed us to reach an audience we would never have tapped into with people joining regularly from the US, Europe and Australia as well as people from around the UK and many now want to see us live and in person.

We're still continuing with our online nights – there is still a demand but now we're having to balance that with increasing demand for our live shows too.

And I'm now creating boxed games giving armchair detectives the chance to prove they really could rival Poirot or Miss Marple when it comes to solving cases with all the case files, clues and information they need to uncover whodunit.



Georgie Watson, razorblue

With every government announcement came a new wave of uncertainty.

Our approach was to put even more focus on building stronger relationships with our client base and prospects.

We remained open and operational throughout the pandemic and have invested heavily in our 24/7 capability, with offices staffed around-the-clock.

We took the opportunity to create and host our own webinars exclusively for our clients to enhance relationships, share advice and showcase our capabilities and expertise.

The online event space was fast becoming crowded, and we wanted to offer something different. Supporting local suppliers (many of whom were also feeling the impact of lockdowns), we provided guests with a tasting experience to enjoy whilst being guided through tech advice, new products and more.

The events have been a huge success and we continue to run them on a quarterly basis – though now we take a hybrid approach.

We also launched our own bi-annual magazine, Out of the Blue. This publication enhances client and prospect relationships and is an opportunity for us to share technical expertise and business updates with our contacts. Advertising opportunities are available for clients, local businesses and partners.

Contacting prospects has become even more difficult over the last two years, with many using the “working from home” as an excuse to not engage. This meant we had to get even more creative with our marketing campaigns, but we can't give away all our secrets!

Building on partnerships has proved extremely useful for us of late and this is an area we will be continuing to work on. Partnering up with local colleges and universities is fantastic for brand awareness and supports us in the longer run as we build a talent pool for recruitment and support young people at the start of their tech careers.

We have continued to support local charities throughout the pandemic and encourage other businesses to continue showing up for those that need it most.

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