

SAFEGUARDS

Lessons From the Lone Star Restart

Here are seven tips from Texas business owners to help you make a smooth return to the shop, store, or office. [🔗](#)

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Photo: Getty Images/Illustration: Chloe Krammel

With Texas two weeks into a gradual reopening, and bars welcoming drinkers on May 22, the state's entrepreneurs got a head start over their peers in many other states, which are just starting to re-

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to expect from the next phase of the Covid-19 crisis—a stage that brings both great relief and new worries. Here are some Lone Star stories:

1. Consult the Competition

To Jayson Rapaport, co-founder of Birds Barbershop, a chain of nine hair salons around Austin, one of the key parts of the process has been his efforts to consult with experts and other local business leaders, including competitors. After getting advice on new safety procedures from an infectious disease expert who happened to be a client, he reached out to his counterparts at several other salons, as well as store and restaurant owners. "Everyone is making decisions without knowing the outcome," he says. "So we can all work off each other." One insight from those conversations: Keep chitchat with customers to a minimum—which is out of the ordinary for a barber shop—because even with masks, talking can increase the chance to virus spread.

2. Don't Rush It

When Texas governor Greg Abbott announced on May 5 that hair salons would be able to open on May 8, Rapaport says, "we knew we wouldn't be ready. We felt the protection wouldn't be in place to be able to confidently greet even the most nervous customers, so we didn't open until 10 days later." Two months with no revenue had burned through the company's savings—"we were at risk of not making it," Rapaport says—but the founders knew that making a good first impression was more important than

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it until you are ready. Your PPE order gets canceled or delayed? Don't open. Don't cut any corners. Wait for the guidelines, and then try to surpass them."

3. Embrace Change

"The magic word is pivot," says Ally Davidson, cofounder of the Austin-based fitness bootcamp company Camp Gladiator. "If your business hasn't changed or pivoted in some way in the past eight weeks, you are not keeping up with what's going on." For Camp Gladiator, the product offering—in-person group fitness classes—became impossible as soon as the coronavirus lockdown began in March. The company started offering virtual workout classes via Zoom and recruited 20,000 new members—while retaining 97 percent of its existing customers. Now that business is re-opening the company has decided its new product is here to stay. Says Davidson: "The world has changed. You have to find a way to embrace that change and make yourself more accessible, more in tune with what customers need. You can't sit back on your heels and wait to go back to normal, because there might not be a back to normal."

4. Keep the Team Sane

Paul Allen, founder of Dallas-based accounting consultancy Embark, has always prided himself on creating a people-first corporate culture. When it came time to send his whole team into remote work, he was quick to emphasize that getting work done isn't enough; staffers, he said, have been

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isolation simply by regularly interacting—on email and Slack, sure, but also in challenges and activities such as taking calls while hiking, or competitions between teams to log the most physical activity in a day. Likewise, now that the office is beginning reopen, Allen is looking for ways to help staffers manage their anxieties about coming back . "If you are not really paying attention to the emotional and mental health of your team, you are setting yourself up for more risk down the line," he says. "Some of these huggy-feely type things we talk about really matter. They have an actual bottom-line impact."

5. Seek New Partners

For six years, Alex Danza's business-class bus service, Vonlane, has steadily grown into the no-hassle ride of choice for the many professionals who regularly shuttle between Texas's largest cities for meetings. That business dried up almost completely in March. Today, although Texans have begun to hit the road again (and Vonlane has re-opened with spaced-out seating), business travel has so far lagged. The company has found new revenue streams by "trying to shake every tree," Danza says. That means parcel deliveries, private charters, and perhaps most promisingly, partnering with recreational destinations. "Cruise lines are going to start departing out of Galveston again, and we are a great alternative for people to get there, or to casinos across the border in Oklahoma or Louisiana. If we can partner to offer a two-night stay, fifty bucks in chips, and a first-class ride back and forth, we think people will buy that."

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"Overcommunicate with your customers and your team," advises Vonlane's Danza. "Let everyone know exactly where they stand at all times. I've done an email to the customer base, a video to the customer base, and constant videos to the team, every step of the way, letting them know where we stand and the steps we are taking for their safety." He finds himself fuming at businesses that haven't done the same, like a summer camp for his kids that didn't reach out until two weeks before its start date, or a ticket-sales company that postponed a concert he'd planned to attend without any detail about possible refunds or new dates. "Even if you don't have an exact answer, let people know you will tell them as soon as you do know. It's such an uncertain time, people will understand—as long as you're transparent."

7. It's a Startup, Not a Reopening

Says Birds' Rapaport: "This whole reopening experience feels like opening a shop for the first time. As we got closer and closer to the date, we realized, there's rehiring, redesigning the process, retraining the staff and the customers for that new process. There's new technology. It's only been two months, but we've realized this feels more like a launch."

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