

Working In Retail During A Pandemic

I currently work for a fabric and craft store in the Coachella Valley. This valley is mostly known for Coachella, Stagecoach, and generally being a vacation spot for other people. If anyone had asked what I thought this year would have looked like, it would have been having a job and traveling. Since January that has not been the case.

January brought its own challenges with starting another semester at College of the Desert, but being let go of the job I had for the past three years. Coronavirus was already being reported on, and it seemed pretty far away since it was in China. February was spent in classes, and looking for a job. I was still not giving much thought to the coronavirus, other things were going on in life. By March, I had been hired at the fabric and craft store here as a key holder. Then a local hospital announced that they had diagnosed an individual with the virus.

At that point, everything seems to have moved quickly. The BNP open was cancelled, Coachella and Stagecoach were postponed, and the panic buyers were hitting all the stores. By March 19th, when the whole state was put in a "stay-at-home" order, I had only been working for less than two weeks. Somehow, the company I worked for considered themselves "essential", and we stayed open to the public for two more days. During those two days, we saw a whole bunch of people shopping for fabric to make face masks; crafts for children now at home from closed schools; and people who were just bored, wanting somewhere to go. Then we got the permission to become a "Buy Online, Pick Up Curbside" store. Our store manager had successfully argued that since the virus was diagnosed in the valley, we had to close to the public for our safety. March 21st was our last day open to the public, then we shut the doors to only those working there.

Working as a curbside pickup only store has its own ups and downs. If a customer wants to buy anything, it has to be done online. Our store is not equipped to do any transaction over the phone, or the ability to take payments for orders from the doors. This has annoyed many customers since many in the valley are older, and do not like having to get things online. If they

can not buy it online, we get a call asking why we won't allow them to order it. If an order takes more than a "reasonable" amount of a customer's time to fill, we get the call asking why we are being so slow. If the website crashes due to the amount of orders being placed at one time, we get called asking why we won't fix the website for them. Almost any question about products, orders and the website, we have had to become knowledgeable experts on. It's the weirdest things that make you question the character of people who live in the same area as you.

My days at work are not always filled with answering calls from complaining customers. Some are very thankful that we are still open and that they can get their items the same day, instead of weeks if they had their order shipped to them. Others have given us money as tip, bought food for everyone working, or given words of encouragement as we work as best we can given the circumstances. For every "bad" customer, there has always been one the polar opposite to make up for them.

The other major change was with school. March 14th was the day that it was announced that all in person classes would be moving to online. By March 16th, the campus was closed to students and everyone non-essential. For me, switching to online was not the hardest thing in the world, but it still wasn't easy. Going to class, seeing people, and having discussions is what I have missed the most. Even though my classes have zoom meetings, it does not feel the same. But this is our new normal now since next semester is projected to be the same way.

After two months of adjusting to a new normal of life, this week brings new changes. It's finals week for classes, and this week will be spent studying, typing and filling out questions. By next week it will all be over, and then the wait for fall semester begins. At work, we will be opening back to the public again, but with restrictions. Only a small amount of people will be allowed in a one time to shop, sneeze guards have been put up in front of registers, and tape has been laid out on the floor to maintain social distancing. My parents have asked if the store opening again has made me anxious; and in some ways it does. If too many people come to the store, they will have to stand in line outside. With the temperature currently around 95-100

degrees outside, people are bound to get upset. When they are able to come inside, they may or may not spend long periods of time shopping around due to boredom. And when its time for them to pay for their items, they may forget about social distancing and get too close to one of us. But this is my life as of right now, and I always try to remember to be thankful for it. So many outside of my personal bubble of life have had it worse, or are still having it worse than me. In this moment right now, if I had to choose what my year would look like, the word adaptable sums it up quite nicely.