

# Black Journal

THE EMPLOYMENT & ENTREPRENEUR MAGAZINE

Fall/Winter 2020

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# How We're Surviving Through the Pandemic

By Connie Russell | C. L. Russell Group, LLC

C. L. Russell Group, LLC (CLRG) is a woman-owned small business full-service workforce training company. Specializing in workforce training, content development, performance assessment and quality assurance, CLRG, like many other small businesses, is learning to persevere in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. Here, the founder and CEO, Connie Russell, shares her inspiring story of how using creativity, connection, and a lot of driven faith to navigate her business survival in the face of adversity.

## Initial Impact

Although the services we offered were adaptable for COVID-19, we still had a few challenges. Training is not a new industry, and it is very competitive. We discovered many businesses who were in other industries and trying to survive like CLRG also tapped into the training industry to save their company during this turmoil. We found ourselves not only a small company competing with other training businesses (large and small), we are now competing with businesses from other industries taking advantage of the training industry opportunities as well.

## COVID-19 Pandemic Impact

Undeniably, this has been the most difficult moment CLRG has faced since our five-year tenure. Our sales decreased more than 80 percent, and that was just the beginning. The severity of the Covid-19 crisis put our business, the community and many families in what some would consider uncharted territory. Even though our services initially included virtual training among other services, we were still majorly affected. Many of our clients who valued the professional training services we provided for their employees, had to step back and reassess their organization's essential needs during the pandemic. Unfortunately, professional training services were no longer an immediate essential service for many businesses. Many of our clients had to redirect their training funds to meet essential needs aligned with health, safety, and government regulations. Increasing our virtual and on-demand training services kept us optimistic—a high percentage of our sales came from instructor-led training. This required face-to-face training, and lack of social distancing. So, when employees began to quarantine at home, we immediately lost 100 percent of our

instructor-led training services for the second quarter and counting. Since health concerns and government pandemic policies directly impacted how people can gather for the unpredictable future, I knew CLRG had to quickly reassess our existing services as well as pivot our business model. It was time to seriously bootstrap.

CLRG shared a few tips that helped them pivot their business during the pandemic below.

## Pandemic Pivoting

As our team brainstormed over innovative marketing tactics, we decided to focus on utilizing two (2) Cs of marketing: Customer Solutions and Convenience. The two Cs of marketing put the customer's interests (the buyer, our clients) ahead of the marketer's interests (the seller, CLRG).

**1. Customer Solutions, Not Products:** Understand your client's needs as well as find solutions to their problems. Customers want to buy value or a solution to their problems. CLRG collaborated with other small businesses as well as community organizations to help identify essential needs. This allowed us to broaden our services not only from a business perspective but from a community professional trainer provider. CLRG also identified the trending industries affected by COVID-19 and aligned essential training services to meet those needs as well.

**Outcome:** Focusing on customer solutions allowed CLRG to expand in new industries such as the Health Industry. This industry was one of CLRG's goals for our 2020 opportunity list! Connecting with the community allowed us the opportunity to offer complimentary virtual skills training courses to individuals who were unemployed during the pandemic or simply wanted to use this time to enhance their skills. We discovered possible ways to be a part of the solution, not just for businesses, but the community as well. This was a healing process for everyone.



**2.** Convenience, Not Place: Customers want products and services to be as convenient to purchase as possible. Design your products/services so the customer feels confident when utilizing your services. Customers do not want to embark on additional work to use your products/services. Putting yourself in the place of the customer when trying to decide how to design a more efficient service isn't always the best route. You already know your products/services so it can be challenging to discover new innovative designs. Try ideation sessions with external stakeholders to discover innovative ways to serve your customers. CLRG wanted to ensure the experience during this sensitive time was beneficial to our customers. Since this was a very unpredictable time, CLRG designed a service that was convenient based on our client needs, with the option of flexibility.

**Outcome:** By initially inquiring with our clients about their 'current' needs, and not focusing on what we had to offer, CLRG was able to design services that were timely, convenient and flexible during the pandemic. When you demonstrate to clients that you are

flexible when meeting their needs (especially during a pandemic), this is when true customer relationships are developed.

### Remaining Optimistic into the Future

Ridiculous faith has become my mantra during this pandemic. I refused to believe the pandemic would be the reason CLRG closed its doors. I must admit, I have been truly blessed with an amazing team. As the saying goes, 'what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger.' We truly discovered what a real shoestring budget feels like, but it has also shown us our true colors of perseverance. There were times my team members would ask why I continued to go into the office. Although my verbal response was 'because we're still paying rent,' I was actually thinking of the words my mother would often say to me: 'Continue to move forward as if it is.' We will continue to strive for excellence, seek innovative solutions and humbly serve. CLRG will continue to believe we have a purpose here and will continue to positively impact the workforce industry for businesses, the community, and families.

### Lessons Learned

As a professional development training company, we found ourselves receiving just as much training as our customers during this pandemic. There were so many lessons learned thus far during the pandemic, and I'm sure there are more to come. But if I had to think of two, it would be leadership and relationships. True leadership is demonstrated during trials. On many occasions, I found myself serving in several roles. But it was through this experience I was able to discover new ideas and see my business from different perspectives. When you're always serving as the leader, sometimes you miss these opportunities to get your hands dirty...literally.

Relationships are key, period. During challenging times, it was very important to stay connected with our customers and associates. Simply sending a hello to let them know you're thinking about them and hoping they're doing well says a lot. It demonstrates your sensitivity to the situation at hand and acknowledges that you're authentic about your relationship. Our customers appreciated this. We will continue to stay optimistic and believe a silver lining is on the way. Until then, we are preparing for the new norm."

Source: clrussellgroup.com



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