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The New Regular: When Small Business Brain Became COVID Brain

by Jim Blasingame

This is the eighth edition of my New Regular series, which is devoted to helping small business owners deal with the financial and emotional damage created by the coronavirus shutdown(s). Normal went MIA around March 15.

Recently on my radio program, one of our many smart Brain Trust members, Jim Schreier, introduced us to a new condition that neuroscientists are studying. Markers of this syndrome include, but are not limited to:

- Being stressed out
- Feeling you can't keep your head above water
- Trouble sleeping
- Struggling with decisions about if/when to pivot
- Worrying that the next decision could bankrupt you

Veteran small business owners will laugh at these, recognizing them as a short list of what they eat for breakfast every morning. Stress? Worry? Struggle? Is that the best you got?

The levels of adversity Main Street operators take in stride every day would kill most civilians (anyone with a regular paycheck). But on top of all the risks and rough edges small business owners learn how to manage, the pandemic-caused, unprecedented, economic shutdown that separated us from customers, frankly, is a new item on our business breakfast menu.

Even those of us who've slayed marketplace dragons and lived to tell the stories are recognizing that, just now, at this moment, things here are different. It turns out, this is in fact, our first pandemic rodeo.

Make no mistake, pre-pandemic, business owners did get overwhelmed, regardless of which goat roping they participated in. Just don't wait around for one of them to admit it. But this year is different because we're suffering an alien attack, compounded by the response to the alien. No one will be judged weak or uncompetitive for admitting to themselves or out loud that their mental and emotional wagons have never been so overloaded.

Which brings us back to that condition mentioned earlier. Neuroscientists Hilke Plassman and Benjamin Kessler, both with INSEAD Knowledge, have coined the term "COVID Brain" to describe this as a 2020 phenomenon. These experts say that when faced with a threat, our brain "scours its long-term memory system for comparable experiences" we can use to deal with it.

That "comparable experience" process is exactly what fires inside the head of a small business owner every day. And as we add dragon-slaying entries in our ownership logbook, the next threat is taken more in stride. We'll call that "Small Business Brain." But alas, there are no coronavirus-comparable logbook entries.

So, how do we deal with COVID Brain? Well, since it resides in the six inches of real estate between our ears, that's where we must mount our defense. In fact, the neuroscientists say the challenge is not so much the stress itself, but how you think about it.

Words matter. Especially the ones you say to yourself. So, think about your pandemic-amplified stress by having a word with yourself. Specifically, three words: ownership, expectations, and belief.

Ownership: Claim what I call the Small Business Ownership Attitude: "As I face challenges in my business today, the only thing in question is how well I'll respond to each one. And the future of my business depends upon the answer to that question. I must own the good, the bad, and the ugly."

Expectations: The concept of expectations is at once powerful and under-appreciated. You can't get and keep a customer if you don't understand their expectations and focus your performance accordingly. To deal with COVID Brain, you have to establish your own business survival expectations and laser-focus performance on them. That's right – you can have more than one, but they must be prioritized. Here are three to get you started.

Prime expectation: In 2020, surviving is winning. Any questions?

Second expectation: I understand and accept that survival will be uncomfortable and messy.

Third expectation: This expensive survival lesson must eventually pay dividends, like when COVID-22 shows up.

Belief: When the Compounding Effect has had its way with you; when the Three U's of the Apocalypse have stampeded over you; when a governor puts the kibosh on customers, in that darkest of moments when you feel absolutely alone, there will only be one force, one last lever still available to you: Belief. You must believe in yourself.

Our here on Main Street, if you don't believe in yourself, all the capital and all the luck and all the customers won't sustain you. And you won't arrive at that moment until there's nothing and no one else you can call on. When it will just be you and your ability to reach deep inside yourself and believe.

Here are some affirmations that I use when I'm having a dark moment word with myself. The first two are of unknown origin and the third is attributed to Henry Ford:

- This is no hill for a climber, and I'm a climber. (My favorite.)
- If it is to be, it is up to me. (This became a book.)
- If I think I can, or if I think I can't, either way, I'll be right. (This one sold lots of cars.)

Claim one – mine or yours – and say it to yourself, out loud.

There is one other dark-moment belief that many have learned from a legendary warrior. King David knew about being up against it. His coronavirus was named Goliath. Surely, the powerful wisdom and refuge in David's 23rd Psalm sprung from one of his dark moments.

I say it out loud to myself, very slowly. "The ... Lord ... is ... my ... shepherd ..."

Write this on a rock ... In the New Regular, own your reality with focused expectations and belief in yourself.

This is no hill for a climber, and I'm a climber.

