

Jerina Vincent: This is the worst time for government to hurt my small business

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Until Covid-19 shut us down, my small gift shop was doing okay selling local handmade products, candles, t-shirts, wooden clocks and so much more. Then, in what felt like a split second, our business nearly melted down when our store full of customers emptied. I panicked a little, had a sleepless night, and then doubled down on the only way I knew to stay connected to my customers and keep the lights on – digital commerce and online marketing.

Thanks to our online presence and the free and low-cost tools from Facebook, Google and other digital partners, our store is surviving and we're even growing a bit. However, keeping a small business profitable during Covid-19 is really hard, and I can't afford to lose my digital partners or have them raise prices because of government regulation or lawsuits.

In 2016 I became an entrepreneur after many unfulfilling years of corporate life. I loved making crafts and teaching others, and I was blessed with a supportive husband who encouraged me to chase my dream. So we chased and chased, and in the beginning it seemed we would never find any customers. Even radio and television commercials didn't work, and those ads were way too expensive.

Then I switched to something simpler and more fun – Google and Facebook ads – and they delivered customers! Suddenly I was spending less and could precisely target my audience – like people who also love handmade gifts. We used Google Analytics to see where our web traffic was coming from, and that helped us improve customer engagement and develop strategies to improve sales. We also used Pinterest and Instagram to share photos of our products and attract people to our website.

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Then Covid-19 arrived, and thank goodness we had already started investing in e-commerce and digital marketing. We quickly added Shopify to our digital mix and doubled our online advertising budget. Before Covid-19, nearly 100 percent of our sales came from people buying products inside the store. Today, almost every sale comes from our website and Facebook. Instead of the pandemic putting us out of business, we have survived as Facebook, Google, Pinterest, Shopify and Instagram became our lifelines and most important partners. I know many other small businesses have also gone almost 100 percent digital, and they feel the same way.

As Congress debates whether Big Tech companies should be broken up or forced to change their operations, I hope lawmakers will not focus only on the giant corporations, but will also think of small businesses before passing new laws that could hurt us inadvertently. Like most people, I believe in commonsense regulations, but not at the expense of the small businesses that keep our economy running.

Big Tech might seem bad to some people, and definitely these companies deserve scrutiny. But to this small business owner the giant companies have been a lifesaver. This wave of Covid-19 would be the worst possible time for Congress to take away tools and resources that give us our best shot at survival. I hope they hear us on this.

Jerina Vincent is the owner and founder of JNJ Craftworks in Verona, WI, and a member of the Connected Commerce Council.