



Bre Phelan, founder and president of Felius Cat Café.

High-touch organizations learn to evolve with focus on tech

by Michelle Leach

Editor's note: This article is part of a series sharing first-hand experiences from local organizations on how their respective industries are adapting to COVID-19.

Replicating the in-person experience and trust many organizations are built on via video and other technological tools is a seemingly universal challenge; regardless of if that line of work matches cats to loving homes,

entrepreneurs to dynamic work environments, or investors to tailored financial plans.

"Since coronavirus, requests to join our foster program have increased by 20%," said Felius Cat Café founder and President Bre Phelan. "Opening your home to a rescue animal in need is an amazing way to give back during this crisis. Not only does it save cats' lives, it also gives the fosterer something positive

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to focus on while social distancing.”

Likewise, on April 16, Phelan noted over the prior four weeks owner-surrender requests increased from one to more than three per week.

“We are in the process of launching a program that would provide free pet food and litter to Omaha community members who simply can’t afford those necessities as a result of losing their job,” she said. “Our hope is that this program will reduce the number of owner surrenders and keep cats in their homes and off the streets.”

To add yet another layer, elective procedures (spaying, neutering) have been halted by many local clinics due to lack of personal protective equipment, which Phelan said means animals are in care longer than normal as Felius waits to get them properly vetted pre-adoption. One can “paw-it-forward,” she said, by paying for a cat’s vetting/adoption costs, or supporting its cat food and litter delivery program.

Felius is also seeking funding for a first-of-its-kind mobile cat café and community engagement bus.

“The goal of this project is to provide underserved community members — in places like

retirement facilities, VA hospitals and low-income schools — with free, convenient animal therapy,” she said, adding 15 minutes of animal interaction produces mental and physical health benefits.

Micah Yost was excited about the rapid growth Populus Coworking had experienced in seven months — then COVID-19 hit.

“It’s really taken a toll on our business, just like many others,” the founder said. “The way we work is definitely changing.”

Partly, Yost said, remote work will stick around and become a huge part of every business that can use it (approximately, 30% of U.S. companies).

“Office space has always been a very inefficient asset,” he said. “At night, everyone is home and a giant building sits completely empty. During the day, large training rooms and conference rooms are unoccupied.”



Yost



Vossen

Originally, coworking businesses aimed to fit more people into spaces, making them cost-efficient.

“That idea of coworking disappeared almost overnight,” he said.

“It’s gone and probably will never come back.”

Coworking has adapted to provide flexible workspace options; for instance, Yost referred to companies needing five seats one day and 22 the next day — an arrangement that he anticipates will thrive on the “other

side” of COVID-19.

Amid COVID-19, Populus hosted a seven-hour livestreamed “Living Room Conference” on April 10.

“The greatest mistake I see people making right now is attempting to take what they’ve done offline and just put it online,” Yost said. “There is a huge disconnect when people are asked to participate in a virtual event from home,

but the presenters are in an office or on stage ... In a virtual event, you don’t have a captive audience and people are unlikely to watch 30- or 45-minute lectures. So, we made the structure 15-minute conversations, and that seemed to keep the engagement a lot higher.”

While Lutz Financial Investment Advisor and Principal Justin Vossen has been most surprised by how well plans supported continuity and business function, human interaction with clients and coworkers “is the most difficult part.”

“Financial planning is very personal for clients and, most times, a relationship is created based on trust and a human connection,” he said. “The biggest problem meeting virtually with a client is that there is less connectivity and personal interaction. In an emotional and uncertain time, that is something that is missing that is hard to replicate over a call or virtual meeting.”

And, while Vossen said the national reaction is to believe things will change dramatically, in reality: “There will probably be some minor operational and technological changes. I’d like to think it will help people appreciate the little things more about their job and who they are working with.”