

PIVOTING THE BUSINESS HELPS MEMBERS STAY AFLOAT

Every New Zealand business is doing it tough at the moment but spare a thought for the tourism operators. Thankfully, their ability to pivot their business to other avenues is helping some stay afloat.

"It's better than doing absolutely nothing and feeling sorry for yourself."

So says Ben Thornton, one half of the brother and sister (Penry Mitchell) team who run Bush and Beach based in Henderson, West Auckland.

Buying the business in 2013, they have continued to grow the company's selection of tours and reputation.

This was recognised in 2016 with Bush and Beach being chosen as the inaugural winner of the New Zealand Tourism Export Council's Small Business Operator of the Year award.

That seems like a lifetime ago as Auckland went into its second alert level 4 lockdown after the COVID-19 Delta variant broke out in the community, shutting all non-essential businesses down.

"We are getting slammed and still going backwards at a great rate of knots, and we've had to keep pumping cash into the business just to keep afloat," Ben says.

"We've come to the realisation that the business is worth less than a third of what it was two years ago, but we also know if we sold for a low-ball offer that the industry could be revived, and business would be booming again.

"So, we're going to stick it out because we still believe at some stage that it will return to where it was before COVID-19.

"We have received a lot of forward bookings from offshore wholesalers, especially from Australia. This was for travel beyond 21 October but in reality, it will be 22 February onwards assuming that the bubble with Australia reopens then.

"On that basis, we know that there will be demand for our tours when the border has reopened, and we want to be there to host these guests. We will

do anything to generate cash flow and survive until then."

How? Well, Ben and his team are lending a hand – drivers and vehicles – with the odd job here and there. While it doesn't offer them anywhere near the same amount of cashflow as their usual business would, it is helping to build goodwill and support with their community.

Their mantra is you name it, they'll do it; anything they can do to stem the financial bleeding – before things become terminal – is worth doing.

Soon after the country's first lockdown last year, Bush and Beach were approached to help NZ Couriers who were struggling to deliver emergency food parcels to families in need.

They were able to reconfigure six vehicles from passenger transport to empty vans in just 24 hours and then hit the road, delivering six days a week.

Another example is the relationship that they've developed with Woven Earth; "It isn't insignificant at all – it's really special," Ben says.

Founded by Kerryn Thrupp, a family violence survivor who has walked the journey of rebuilding her life with her two children, Woven Earth is a charity that helps make life better for women and children fleeing family violence.

"We were contacted by Kerryn in November last year who had heard how tough tourism businesses were doing and wanted to help. It is pretty humbling accepting charity from a charity so to speak!

"Essentially Woven Earth's mission is to make homes out of houses for families who flee violence with no possessions.

"So, we now send out one or two vans every week to collect donated furniture



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and other household items. This is then stored at our depot, and two to three times a week, we then help set up homes all over Auckland.

"We are honoured to be part of the solution. It's very grounding when we realise that so many people are in a far worse situation than we are. And Woven Earth is helping us in our hour of need, so we need to return the favour, continuing to assist with transport and logistics even after the borders finally reopen. It also helps futureproof us by giving us a non-tourism related income source."

Ben sees this relationship spanning the test of time; he believes he will need to dedicate one long wheelbase sprinter and two drivers five days a week post-lockdown because, unfortunately, there will be huge, pent-up demand for their services from people being in lockdown.



BEN AND HIS TEAM are lending a hand. While it doesn't offer them anywhere near the same amount of cashflow as their usual business would, it is helping to build goodwill and support with their community.

While it is a commercial arrangement, Ben says the team isn't doing it for the love of the money; it is extremely rewarding work.

"It gives our guys some work, and they come back at the end of the day feeling really good about themselves having helped in whatever they can.

"Don't get me wrong, it's been hard. I've just written a memorandum of understanding with NZ Couriers to provide a couple of vans for their fleet to help them with work because they're expecting a huge uptick in demand with people shopping online from home.

"There will also be huge short-term demand for commercial courier services when Auckland businesses open up again under Level 2 and 3 alert levels."

Bush and Beach has also started providing moving services, complete with a vehicle and staff to move items in addition to regular corporate work such as staff outings, transfers, and Christmas parties.

"I'm proud with what we've been able to do but it is still soul-destroying seeing the business go backwards and watching the mortgage get bigger.

We still have our eye on the prize, the bigger picture, and one day when things return to normal, we want to be around for it."

They're not afraid to get their hands dirty with other projects either – literally.

With many tours taking place in Piha and the Waitakere Ranges, the Bush and Beach team noticed that the birdlife in the Glens Valley left a lot to be desired as their numbers were being decimated by pests.

And unfortunately, Ben says, Auckland Council had limited resources. "So we thought 'bugger it, we'll do it ourselves!'"

One of his guides used to be a professional pest controller and helped set up various pest traps and bait stations in the valley, killing pests like weasels, rats, and stoats.

Receiving a \$1,000 council grant meant Ben could pay about 10 weeks' worth of wages, however, he says he has probably shouldered about 85 per cent of the costs over the course of about 18 months.

But it's worth it because the birdlife began returning, and even though they can't continue to afford to do it at the moment, one of the business' senior guides, Tony Dunn, spends about five hours a fortnight caring for the traps.

"Because one day, we'll be going back in with our clients and we want to ensure they can enjoy nature at its best," Ben says.

Sounds Connection's Maria Baxter says she is in a similar position to Ben, except they have a lot less opportunities to pivot in Picton compared to Auckland.

Established in 1993, Maria and Mark built on the foundations Max's father laid in his operation of a 20-year-long fishing charter.

2019 was one of the business' best and meant the Baxters could finally start to reinvest properly. Then COVID-19 ripped the rug out from underneath their feet.

"Cruise excursions and transfers were a big part of our growth. The majority of our team were on the pension, so they had to revert back to it to survive," Maria says.

"We kept two employees as well as ourselves, and the others are in alternative employment but keen to come back. Fishing charters and transport jobs have kept us going. The tour part of the work is almost non-existent except for local friends getting together for a day out.

"We are committed to staying in the business as we ride our second big COVID-19 wave with more to come for sure. So, if you want to make our lives easier, all I can say is get vaccinated New Zealanders!"