

## ?Relationship? is key focus for local small business owners

In a time of crisis,  
it can't all be about dollars and cents; maintaining relationships is of the utmost importance.

So says Deb Clark,  
owner of Oakridge Fashions, the popular boutique in the Aurora Shopping Centre at Yonge Street and Murray Drive.

Ms. Clark is just one  
of countless small business owners across York Region who have been grappling with the new normal that COVID-19 has imposed upon us for the time being, while also looking at creative ways of continuing to serve customers while keeping revenue coming in.

'?Relationship' is  
the key word,' she says. 'At a time like this, it can't all be about dollars and cents, but, at the same time, our small businesses are under attack in a way by this very virus. One of the things I determined very quickly was that while we could no longer have a face-to-face experience with our customers, we could use technology to reach out to them and let them know, first and foremost, that we are thinking of them. I have three messages I keep giving to my customers: I am thinking of you, I miss you, and I hope that you will remember me as one of your favourite small businesses at this time.'

It is important for  
small businesses, she says, to 'be sensitive' to the fact that at this moment, individuals are being necessarily cautious about their spending and the question to customers should be, 'How can I serve you?'

'At the end of the  
day, every business is measured by its ability to serve its customers,' she says. 'I think that one of the differences that has always been true of small businesses versus large conglomerates has always been about the extra service. That is the difference-maker and that is the reason so many Aurorans love their favourite small businesses: because they have come to know when they walk through these doors, they are a known entity with a name, a face, and a record of business together.'

While it can't be  
said that Oakridge is running 'business as usual', they are moving forward in a different manner. Ms. Clark has been in the store just about every day working on orders that have come in through their website, personally making deliveries to local customers wherever possible to maintain those all-important relationships, and taking to social media platforms like Instagram to stay in touch with customers.

Instagram videos, for

instance, take customers step by step through the online ordering process while introducing new lines of product specifically chosen to meet the needs coming out of COVID-19.

'Our feeling is this

is not the time for high fashion: this is a time for pieces that are

comfortable, affordable, and that make sense for at home,' says Ms. Clark.

'Another thing we are doing differently is we recognize that people may have

birthday gifts to buy for someone, or special occasion gifts to purchase for a

woman, but with no store open to go to. We are trying to draw attention to

those kinds of items on our website that may be purchased online that do not

have an issue about fit. For example, we have a video to draw attention to a

brand-new collection of lightweight spring ponchos and the idea there is that

it is one size fits all. The idea also is that it is a lovely, comfortable

little treat to perhaps give to yourself if you're at home. It certainly is a

comforting thing, it brightens your day, and if you're looking at wanting to

make a purchase to support my small business, this is one way a woman can do so

without worrying about the question online of 'Will it fit?'

'Then, the next thing

we are going to do is put a whole bunch of beautiful spring accessories

together in the video for those same reasons. What can you get for a gift that

you need to buy that has not got an issue around fit? What can you purchase for

yourself to brighten your day? We're mindful it is about the right things to

suggest to our customers who really do want to support their favourite local

businesses.'

Since this

significant gear shift in business operations, Ms. Clark says feedback has been

nothing but positive and she is 'extremely grateful' that long-time customers

are staying in touch.

'The message is, 'How

can I brighten your day, and how can I serve you at this time? And how can you

support me?' I do like to give my customers some ideas I feel have integrity,

that have really good, common sense behind them because I have had customers

who have said, 'How can I support you? I have never shopped online before.' We

have put together a tutorial video that they can just watch, which shows me

putting an order through from start to finish.

'Some people just

need a little extra help. We're at the end of the phone helping our customers

and we're also at the end of emails. We're everywhere, but the response back

from that initial video that I put out greeting my customers last weekend was

so heartwarming. At a time when I, like every other small business person, is

nervous, anxious and worried, to receive orders coming in right after that,

onto our online system, was absolutely encouraging. It reminded me that our

customers are there and they care. I think it is just a matter of reaching out

to them and reminding them that you're here, telling them that you care, that

you're thinking about them, and that you're here to serve them.'

For more, visit [oakridgefashions.com](https://oakridgefashions.com) or follow them on Instagram @oakridgefashions.

**By Brock Weir**