

DIGITALLY EMPOWERED

How digital tools power small
businesses amid COVID-19

Presented by



Connected Commerce
Council



Kettlebell Kings | Austin, TX

Digital tools are empowering survival today and recovery tomorrow

The spirit of American small businesses is driven by ingenuity and resolve. Amid the ongoing COVID-19 crisis and the unprecedented uncertainty it has created in our communities and economies, millions of small businesses are using digital tools and online marketplaces to adapt and keep their businesses open.

The fallout from the pandemic has been swift, catching many businesses off guard and unprepared. Many small businesses empowered by digital tools before the COVID-19 outbreak have sidestepped the hardships faced by other companies. Some have even thrived in this new digital first world.

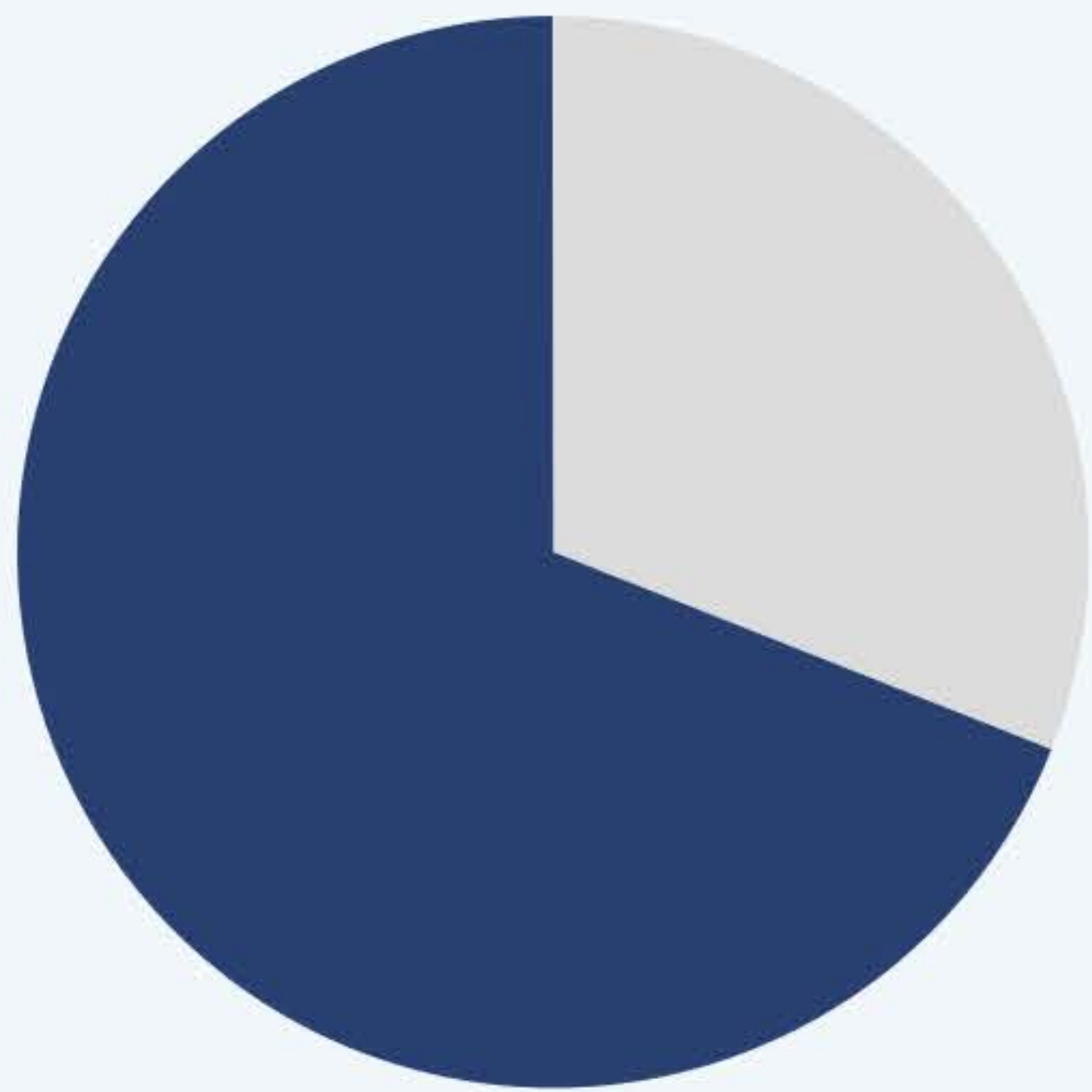
This report highlights how small businesses are deploying digital tools during the COVID-19 crisis and the effects those tools are having on their approach to a “new normal.” This report was developed by the Connected Commerce Council in partnership with Google, based on data collected from a study conducted by LRWGreenberg.



Peeko Oysters | New Suffolk, NY

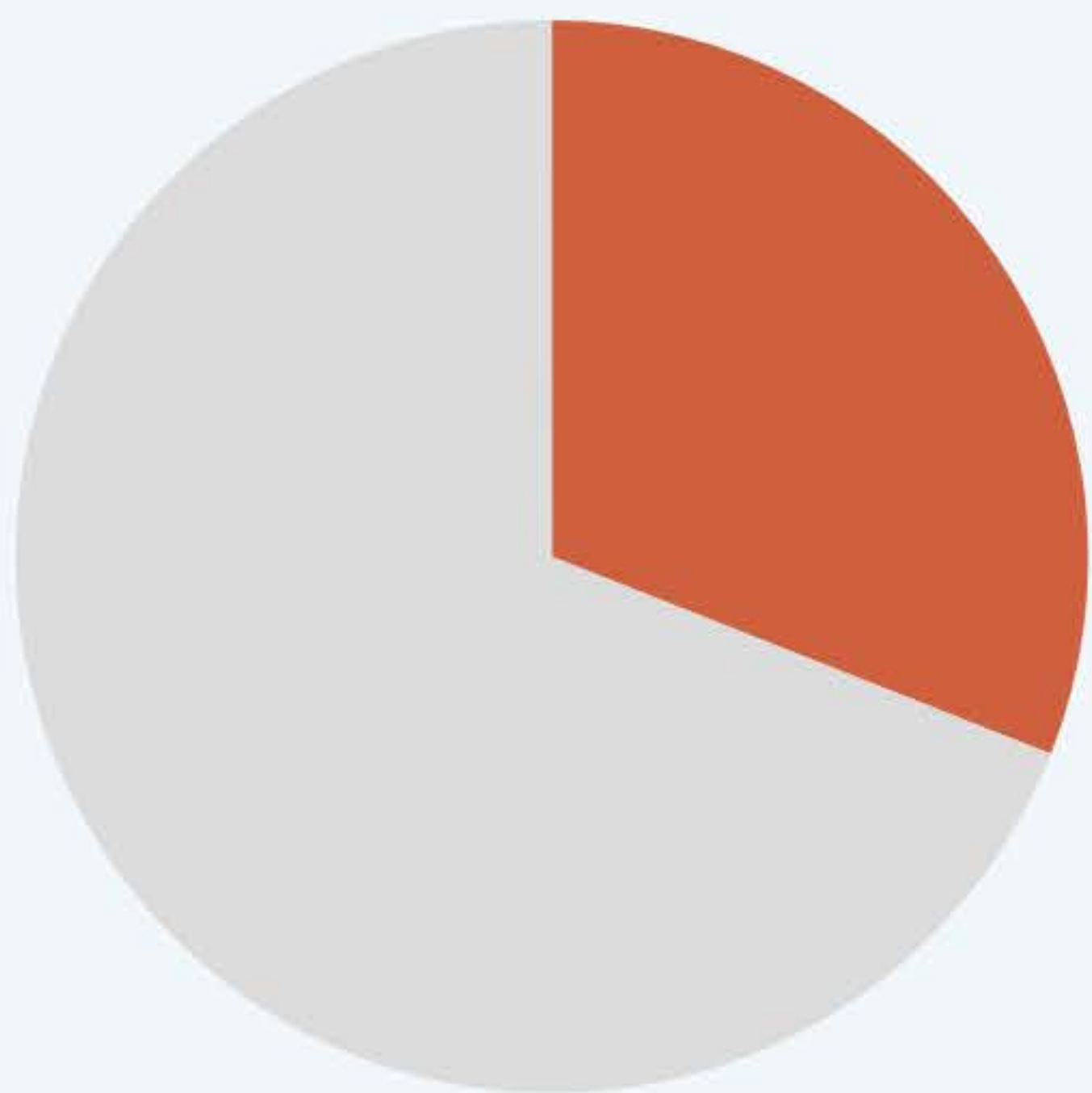
Lead Findings

While many American small businesses are negatively affected, the COVID-19 crisis is also revealing a remarkable resilience within this community, in part due to the use of digital tools



74%
return to normal in 6 months

American small business owners are resilient and 74%¹ of them expect their business will be back to business as usual within 6 months.



31%
would close without digital tools

31% of small businesses say that without digital tools they would have had to close all or part of their business during the COVID-19 crisis.

40%
relying on digital tools for new customers

40% of small businesses say they are relying on digital tools to find new customers during the COVID-19 crisis, and 36% say they are using digital tools to pivot to online sales.

70%
say digital tools are useful

70% of small businesses say digital tools are useful to them during the COVID-19 crisis, with 30% saying digital tools are essential.

34%
will rely more on digital tools

One-third (34%) of small businesses say that they will rely more on digital tools moving forward from the COVID-19 crisis.

80%+
want to learn more about digital tools

Over 80% of small business owners are interested in learning more about how to use digital tools to help their business move forward.

¹*% among businesses who were still operational at the time the survey was taken, even if closed temporarily.

Digital tools have frequently acted as a “safety net,” helping many small businesses avoid closing, downsizing, and severely reduced revenue

57%

negatively affected by COVID

While 15% of small businesses say their revenue projections for the year are unchanged by the COVID-19 crisis, 57% of small businesses say their projections have been negatively affected and just over 20% of small businesses say it is too soon to tell.

2X

more likely to close

Small businesses without a pre-existing e-commerce presence are twice as likely (31% vs. 15%) to report that they temporarily stopped operating during the crisis than those who were already selling goods or services online.

4.5X

more likely to increase revenue

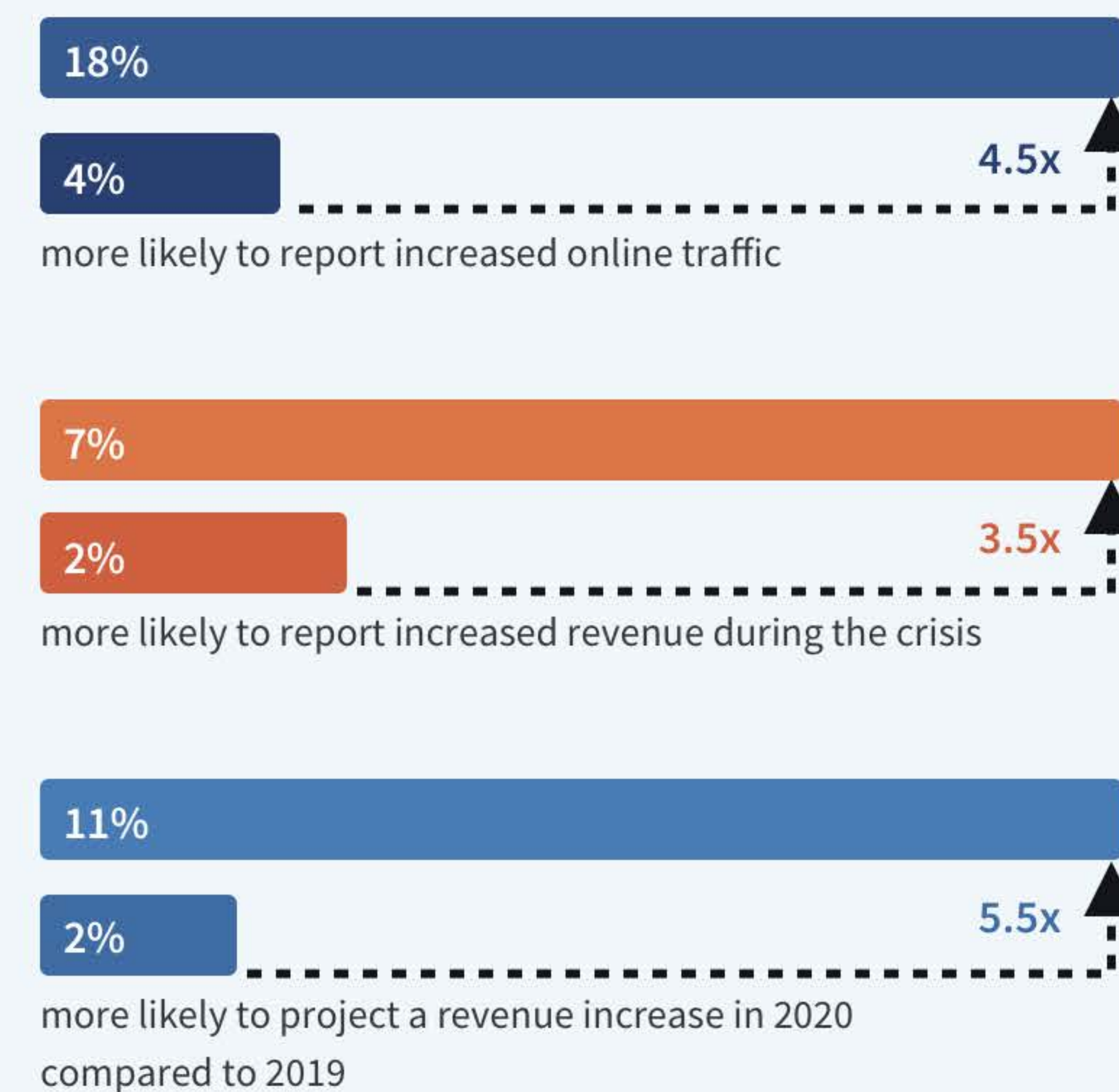
Business owners who feel empowered by digital tools have projected less loss of revenue as a result of the COVID-19 crisis than those who did not. They were also 4.5X more likely (9% vs. 2%) to project a revenue increase.

The use of digital tools has been particularly helpful to suburban small business owners, a majority of whom credits digital tools with saving them from losing revenue, closing, or even downsizing.

5.5X

more likely to increase revenue

However, the subgroup of small businesses using e-commerce pre-crisis are 4.5X (18% vs. 4%) more likely to report increased online traffic, 3.5X (7% vs. 2%) more likely to report increased revenue during the crisis, and, remarkably, 5.5X (11% vs. 2%) more likely to project a revenue increase in 2020 compared to 2019.



Small businesses are using digital tools more to connect with customers, find new customers, and sell online

76%

relying more on digital tools during COVID

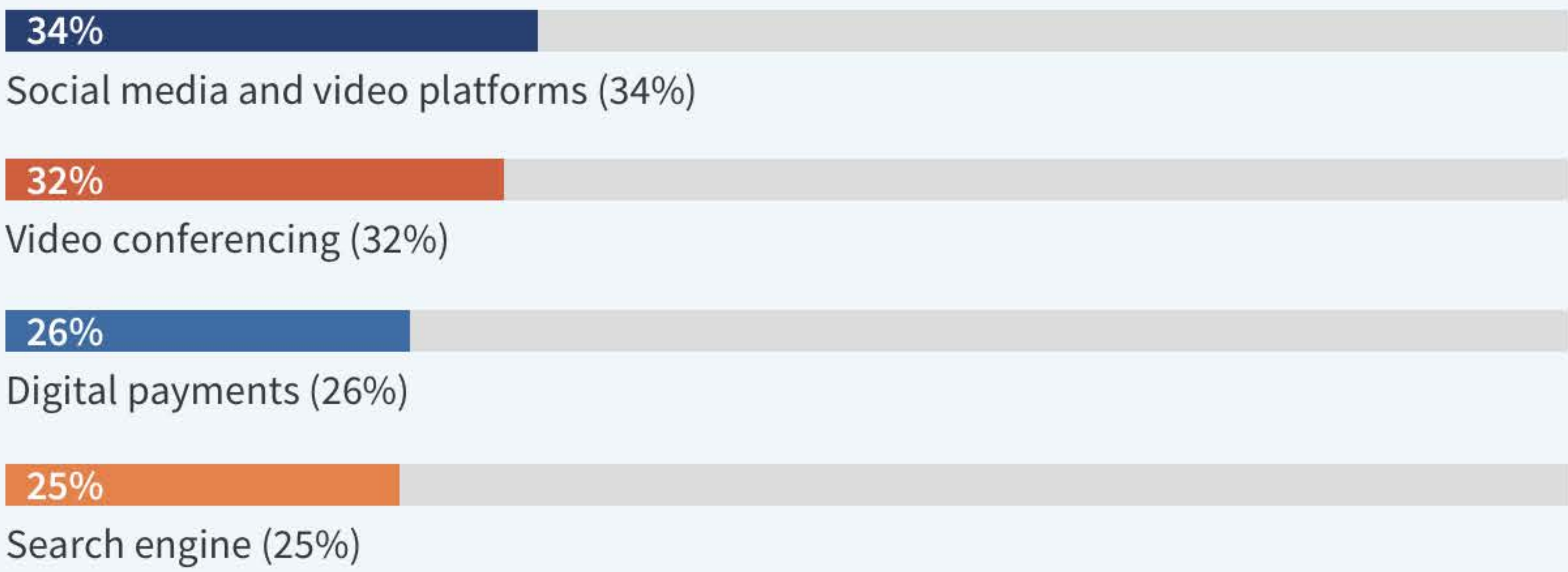
American small businesses are relying more on digital tools during the COVID-19 crisis, with 76% saying they're relying more on digital tools to run their business.

50%+

relying more on digital tools to communicate

A majority of American small businesses are relying more on digital tools to communicate with their customers, find new customers, and sell products and services online during the COVID-19 crisis.

The tools that small business owners report as most helpful to them during the COVID-19 crisis are the following:



11%

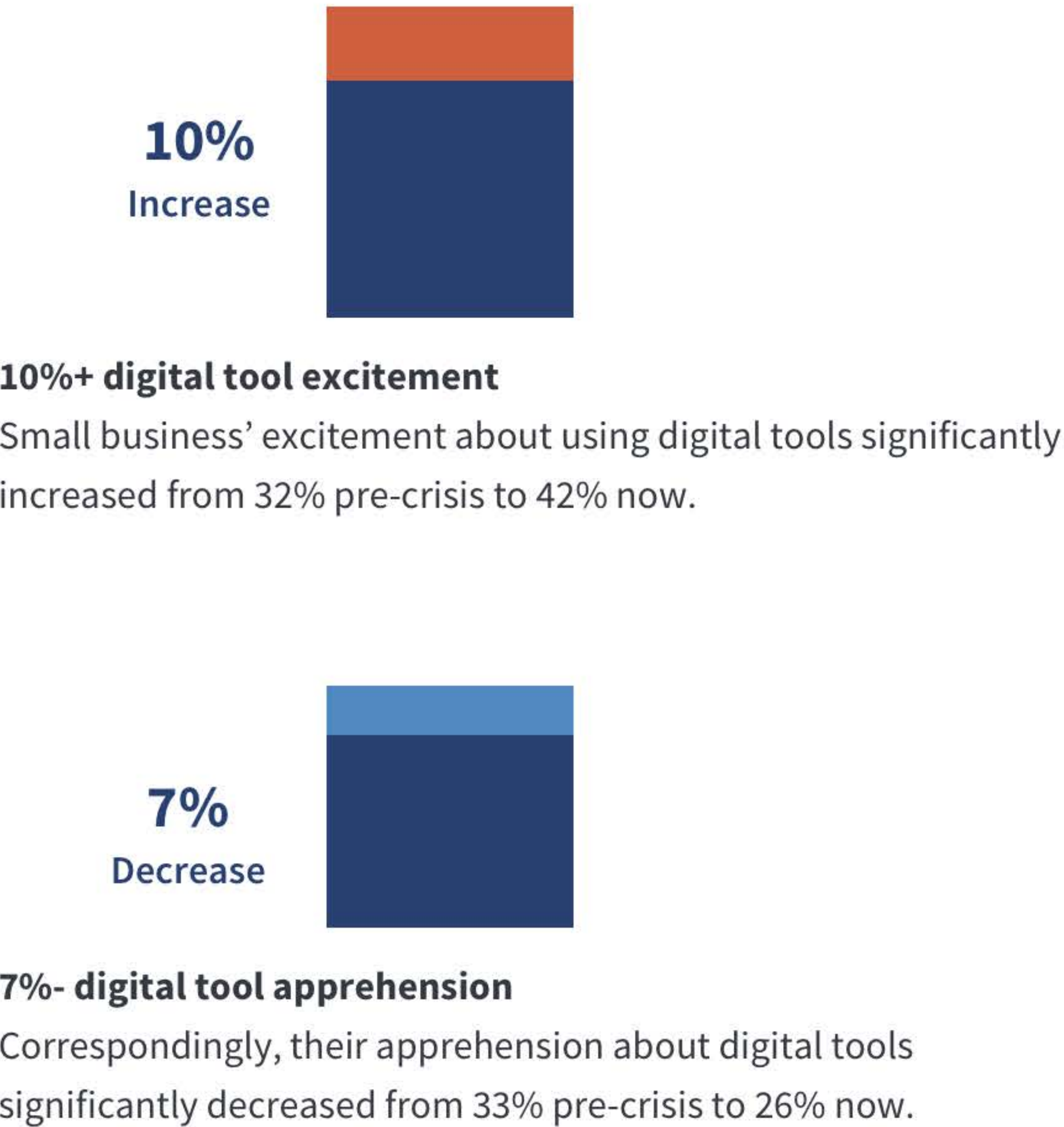
women winning with digital tools

Women small business owners are 11% more likely to make use of digital tools than men, particularly when it comes to social media (43% vs. 29%).

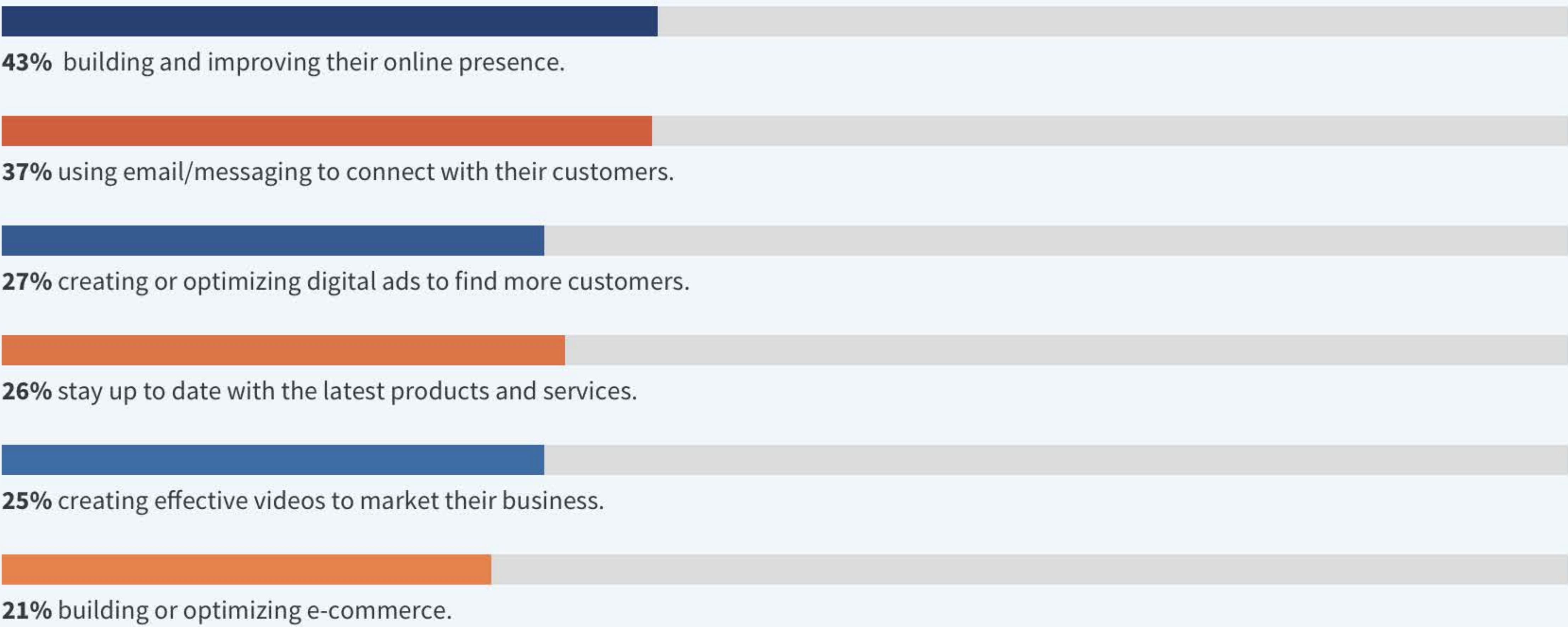


Small business will rely more on digital tools; learn more about how they empower business

The COVID-19 crisis has also increased small business owners' excitement for, and decreased their apprehension of, using digital tools in their operations.



Over 80% of small business owners are interested in learning more about how to use digital tools to help their business move forward.



13%+
interest in digital tools

This increase was particularly pronounced among the subgroup of less digitally prepared businesses, whose interest in digital tools jumped to 35% from 22% pre-crisis.

Emergence of the Digital Safety Net

The agility and resilience of digitally empowered small businesses is a bright spot coming out of the COVID crisis, and an important marker on the road to recovery. Nearly one-third (30%) of small business owners say they can't successfully navigate the uncharted obstacles brought on by the pandemic without digital tools. 70% of small businesses say digital tools are useful to them during the COVID crisis, with 30% of them reporting that digital tools are essential.

Digital tools are providing a lifeline to small businesses during the COVID-19 crisis, helping to preserve revenue or even ensuring a company's basic viability. Almost half of small businesses (46%) would have seen a negative impact from nationwide shelter-in-place restrictions, owners say, had it not been for their access to digital tools. Meanwhile, almost a third (31%) say they would have been forced to close all or part of their business without such tools.

"I'd survived one recession already, but this was just a different beast altogether. The digital side of the business is what really saved us. Moreover, it opened the door to a whole new online community that is going to continue positively impacting us into the future."

Juanny Romero, Sunrise Coffee | Las Vegas, NV

These findings are particularly stark for small businesses with an online presence. A majority of those businesses with an online presence (63%) say their companies would be negatively affected, if not for an increase in online sales. Meanwhile, 41% say they would have had to close all or part of the business without the boost provided by their online visibility.

The COVID crisis presents a specific challenge and huge uncertainty to small businesses. That environment is driving more than 7 out of 10 small businesses (76%) to turn to digital tools to help weather the pandemic. And 91% of small businesses for whom digital empowerment was already baked into their DNA are ramping up their reliance on digital tools to run their business, compared with 71% of those for whom digital tools are not essential.



Sunrise Coffee | Las Vegas, NV

E-commerce empowers sustainability, evolution, and growth in crisis

Twenty-five percent of small businesses rely on e-commerce platforms for day-to-day operations. These platforms are valuable tools for helping them stay afloat during the crisis. Small businesses without a pre-existing e-commerce presence are about twice as likely (31% vs. 15%) to report they temporarily stopped operating during the crisis than those who were already selling goods and services online.

Small businesses with pre-existing e-commerce are also 4.5X (18% vs. 4%) more likely to report increased online traffic, 3.5X (7% vs. 2%) more likely to report increased revenue during the crisis, and, remarkably, 5.5X (11% vs. 2%) more likely to project a revenue increase for 2020 compared to 2019.

An e-commerce platform also fuels a more optimistic outlook. These businesses were more than three times less likely to believe it will take a year or longer for their businesses to recover in the post-COVID-19 world (3% vs. 11% among those without an e-commerce presence).

“The kind of sales we’ve seen are just orders of magnitude larger than anything we would have expected—and there is no way we could’ve done so well if the company were not as digitally connected as it is.”

Charlie Mayer, Spice House | Evanston, IL



The Spice House | Evanston, IL

Empowering communication and collaboration

Digital tools are powering small businesses through the crisis. Small businesses with an online presence before COVID-19 are well positioned to benefit from the “new normal” business environment as consumers increasingly turn to the internet for even mundane shopping needs. Those businesses employing digital tools pre-COVID-19 are nearly three times as likely to observe increased online traffic compared with companies for whom digital tools weren’t already essential (14% vs. 5%).

Meanwhile, in a new era mostly lacking face-to-face customer contact, digital tools are taking center stage. A majority of small

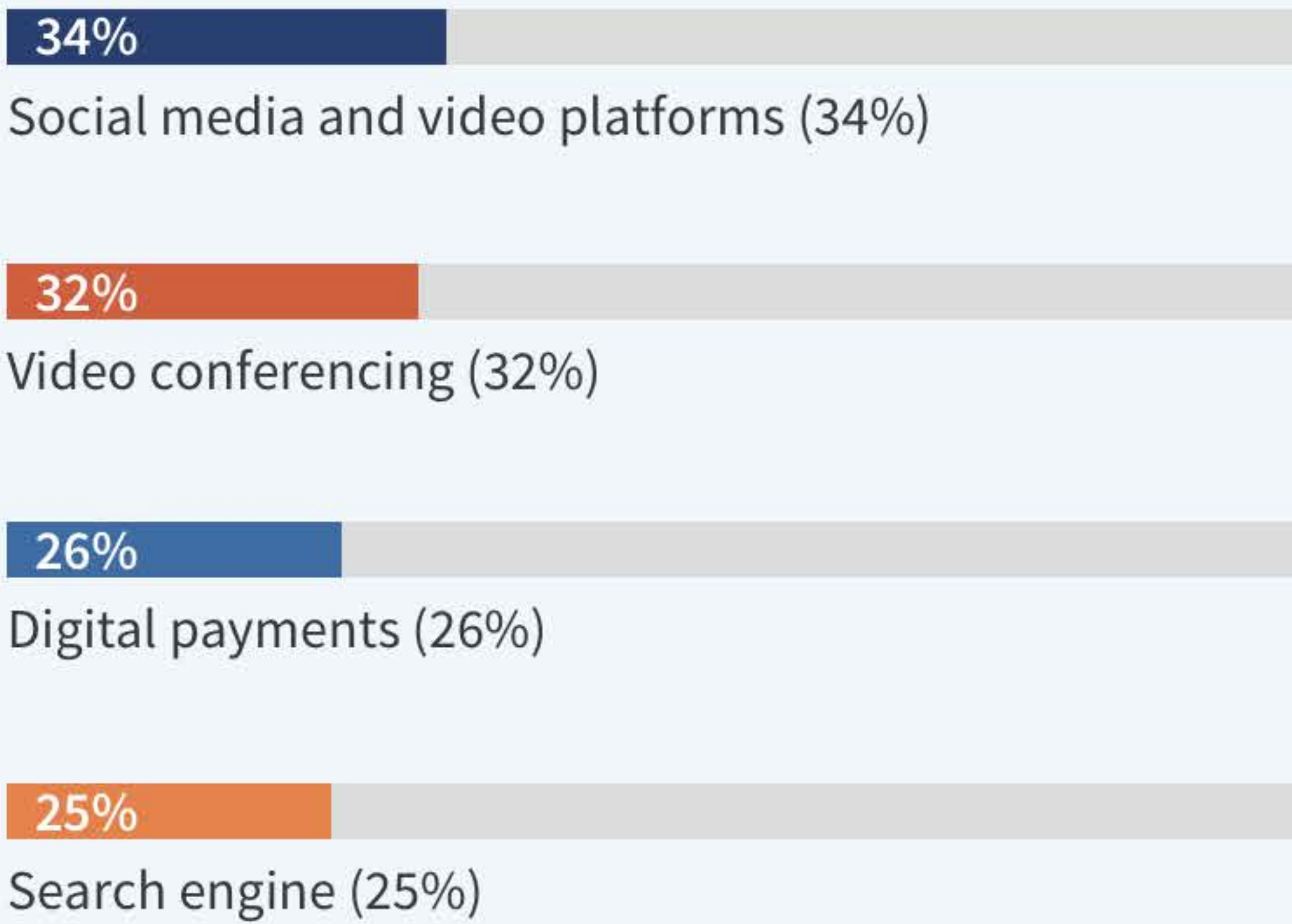
businesses (52%) say they are increasing their use of digital tools to communicate and contact their customers.

With national social distancing guidelines in place, a majority of American small businesses are relying more on digital tools to communicate with their customers, find new customers and sell products and services online during the COVID-19 crisis. The biggest rates of increase are in social and video platforms (34%) and video conferencing tools (32%).

“It is precisely because we had invested in Google Ads and Analytics ahead of time that we were able to do this,” Chad says. “If we didn’t have that data, we’d just be spending more money and getting less results.”

Chad Price, Kettlebell Kings | Austin, TX

The tools that small business owners reported as most helpful to them during the COVID-19 are the following :



Increased value to small businesses

Among small business owners, the economic side-effects of the COVID-19 quarantine are driving a new consideration of the importance of digital tools to their businesses. Only 23% of them saw digital tools as essential before the crisis, while 30% do now, mid-crisis -- a 30% increase in perception of value.

Unprecedented challenge is often a catalyst for change and innovation; it's been no different for small businesses affected by the pandemic.

The excitement to experiment with new digital tools jumped 10% in response to the crisis, from 32% pre-COVID-19 to 42% now. The number of small businesses unsure about deploying digital tools before the crisis (33%) decreased significantly (26%). Meanwhile, those small businesses that were less digitally prepared are showing a robust interest in the use of digital tools as a response to the COVID-19 crisis. For small businesses already onboard with digital tools, this excitement ticked up slightly, from 66% to 68% during the crisis. However, for companies where digital tools were not previously essential, 35% now indicate excitement for them compared with only 22% pre-COVID-19.

“We are a digital-first business, and that is what has allowed us to continue helping others.”

Jasmine Crowe, Goodr | Atlanta, GA

Digital tools small businesses want to learn about to help run their businesses:

43% building and improving their online presence.

37% using email/messaging to connect with their customers.

27% creating or optimizing digital ads to find more customers.

26% stay up to date with the latest products and services.

25% creating effective videos to market their business.

21% building or optimizing e-commerce.



The Spice House | Evanston, IL

A new normal powered by digital tools

While small businesses are using digital tools more in the short term, it's likely the crisis will create a new, long-term shift toward the increased use of such tools. A majority (54%) of businesses that temporarily closed a physical location during the crisis now anticipate using digital tools more when operations return to normal.

Results that breed success stick around. More than one-third of small businesses (34%) say they will continue to rely more on digital tools in the aftermath of COVID-19 than before, compared with only 1% who say they will rely on them less.

Although the ending to this story is yet to be written, it's clear that this digitally empowered momentum is here to stay. This is especially strong among small businesses that already see digital tools as essential to their business in the pre-COVID-19 era (42% anticipate an increase in use vs. 32% for whom digital tools were not essential). For this digitally empowered group, the pandemic likely validates their existing digital strategy, underscores the use of digital technologies in the future, and instills in them a confidence in their ability to overcome whatever challenges may arise.

“When COVID first hit, it seemed like Armageddon for my business. In a previous age, it likely would have been,” Peter says. “But digital tools allowed us to adapt and survive. Now, we have hope for the future again.”

Peter Stein, Peeko Oysters | New Suffolk, NY



Goodr | Atlanta, GA

Kettlebell Kings

www.kettlebellkings.com

Chad Price, Founder & Managing Partner

Austin, TX

Retail / Personal Fitness



Kettlebell Kings is the brainchild of three friends—Jay Perkins, Nehemiah Heard, and Chad Price—who wanted to build a company that would bring people together and make them happier and healthier. Their company focuses primarily on selling kettlebells directly to customers over the web, but has turned toward the sale of digital products like at-home workout programs and online training sessions. Chad believes this shift helped Kettlebell Kings stand out before the COVID-19 crisis, and helped the company thrive throughout it. It has also been key to helping their customers stay healthy at home.

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want to learn more about digital tools

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Kettlebell Kings | Austin, TX

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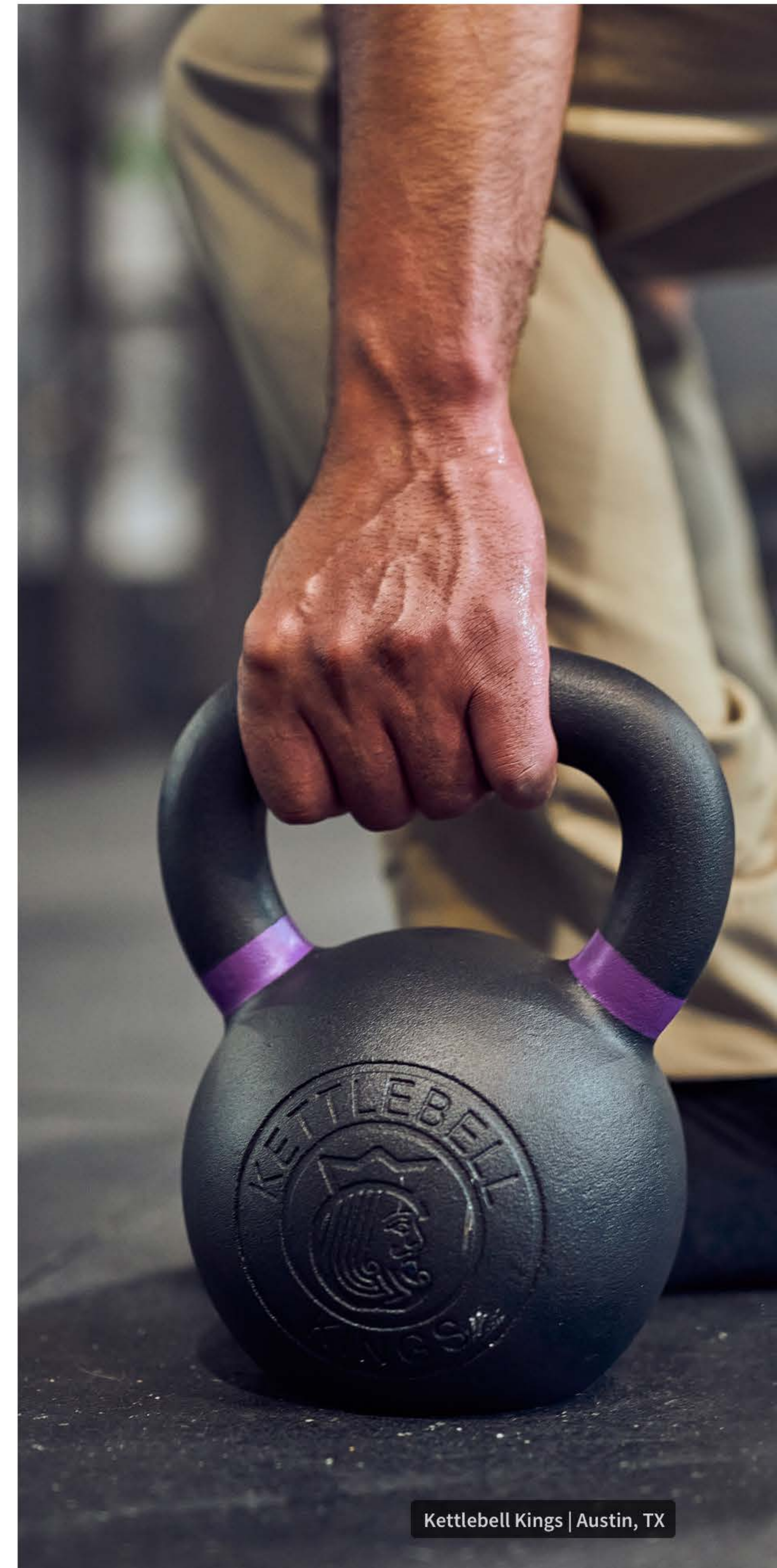
With a full suite of online marketing and logistics tools, including Google Ads and Google Analytics, and an active presence—and loyal customer base—in kettlebell-related forums on social platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit, Kettlebell Kings has focused from the start on using digital solutions to grow. It now has an infrastructure of tools that work together to handle everything from customer experience to inventory management.

Kettlebell Kings was initially hit by the COVID-19 crisis as the disease’s global spread caused supply chain disruptions. Then, nearly overnight, everything changed. Domestic quarantine announcements led to a surge of interest in home fitness products, and Kettlebell Kings found itself facing a massive volume of sales. This would have overwhelmed many small businesses—but not this digitally connected company. Kettlebell Kings processed more sales in one day than it typically would have done over the course of months. Nearly every piece of inventory sold out. “It was just one of the craziest spikes in velocity that we’ve ever seen,” Chad says. “But it was also surprisingly easy for us to go from, say, 10 orders a day up to 500, because it was just a matter of pushing another button on the computer, rather than having to implement an entire new process.”

This also freed up Kettlebell Kings’ leadership to focus on other challenges—and opportunities. The company had been moving into the live events space and planned to hold several events with major gyms across the country when the pandemic hit. With live in-person events on hold, the company decided to lean even more into its digital offerings by shifting dollars from an advertising budget they clearly no longer needed. Thanks to

analytics that helped the company understand what customers needed and how to improve its digital offerings accordingly, those decisions were made easier and more profitable. “It is precisely because we had invested in Google Ads and Analytics ahead of time that we were able to do this,” Chad says. “If we didn’t have that data, we’d just be spending more money and getting less results. We’d be throwing it into the abyss.”

These improved digital products are now helping advance an overall shift in fitness culture—one that Chad thinks is long overdue. “You don’t need a full gym for a full-body workout, you just need a kettlebell and a smartphone,” Chad argues. “More Americans are now embracing this, and I think that’s a good thing—for their wallets and for the health of our country in general.” As Kettlebell Kings looks to the future, the company plans to expand their digital offerings. It’s also set to expand the type of digital infrastructure that helped it weather the storm—and make its customers happier and healthier as a result.



Kettlebell Kings | Austin, TX

The Spice House

www.thespicehouse.com

Charlie Mayer, CEO

Evanston, IL

Retail / Food Services



Charlie Mayer loves to cook—always has. And so, when he had an opportunity to take over a 60-year-old spice business, he couldn't say no. It wasn't as if he had the most traditional qualifications. "I'd never run a company. I had no prior experience in retail. I didn't know a thing about digital marketing or e-commerce. This business was based in the Midwest, and I was living in Washington, D.C. Seemed perfect." It was a tough challenge, but Charlie's drive, paired with his passion for digital tools and cloud-based efficiency, turned out to be a great fit for The Spice House. The digital transformation he led enabled it to not only survive but also help others do so as well when crisis struck.

76%

rely more on digital tools during COVID

Business owners who feel empowered by digital tools have projected less loss of revenue as a result of the COVID-19 crisis than those who do not. They are also 4.5X more likely (9% vs. 2%) to project a revenue increase.



helpful to suburban small business

The use of digital tools is particularly helpful to suburban small business owners, a majority of whom credit digital tools with saving them from losing revenue, closing, or even downsizing.



The Spice House | Evanston, IL

“It is precisely because we have been able to do so well as a digitally connected business that we are able to help others collectively get through the challenging times with us.”

The Spice House prides itself as a purveyor of spices, herbs, blends, and extracts to everyone from Michelin-star chefs to home cooks. It began as a single store on Galena Street in Milwaukee in 1957, and first got on the internet in 2000. Charlie digitized the back office in 2018 and replatformed the website in 2019. He sees the company’s future as digitally native and internet-first.

As a first step in early 2018, Charlie introduced Slack and Zoom, which were obvious and necessary tools given that he lived hundreds of miles away. “My remote leadership basically required the adoption of these tools early on,” Charlie says, “which is why when COVID hit, communication really wasn’t that big of a deal for us; it was just, ‘See you on Slack, see you on Zoom.’” But the most important change for the company’s operations overall—not to mention its ability to function effectively during a pandemic—was to optimize internet sales, in-store pickups, and customer service operations and communications via platforms like Shopify and Zoho and to digitize its day-to-day functions through G Suite. The company also focused heavily on digital advertising through Google and Facebook.

Charlie recalls the onset of the COVID-19 crisis as a scary and uncertain time. He revised operations at the company’s four brick-and-mortar locations for a few days before deciding to shut them down, except for online pickup orders. At that point, he had no choice but to cross his fingers and hope for the best. He didn’t have to wait long for an answer. Customers were ready to reconnect with their love of cooking in quarantine, and The Spice House had just what they needed. Sales exploded online. The business began shipping at unprecedented levels with more orders than any other time in its six-decade history.

“April and May are traditionally the worst months for spice-buying, and November and December, where holiday sales account for the majority of our profit each year, are always the best,” Charlie says. “Well, the last two months have been bigger than the holidays. The kind of sales we’ve seen are just orders of magnitude larger than anything we would have expected—and there is no way we could’ve done so well if the company were not as digitally connected as it is.”

The company rapidly expanded its workforce to keep up with demand, bringing on many workers who had been laid off from local restaurants. Charlie says the ability to help out his colleagues in a struggling industry is one of the most rewarding aspects to come out of this situation. In addition to that is his ability to spotlight other food-related small businesses in his marketing communications and to invite Spice House customers to consider checking them out too. “We’re all in this together,” Charlie says, “and it is precisely because we have been able to do so well as a digitally connected business that we are able to help others collectively get through the challenging times with us.”

The Spice House was founded on the idea that great spices and great food can enrich every kitchen. Now that many Americans are rediscovering cooking, Charlie can help thanks to his company’s strong digital backbone. “Our systems work the same today as they did three months ago, and it’s really amazing when you think about it,” Charlie says. “The world can go on pause for months at a time, and a cloud-connected business can just go right on.”



The Spice House | Evanston, IL

Sunrise Coffee

www.sunrisecofeelv.com

Juanny Romero, Founder & CEO

Las Vegas, NV

Retail/Food

Coffee is all about community. That's how Juanny Romero sees it. Juanny, a former barista, opened her first coffee shop on the first day of the Great Recession of 2008. She now owns three cafes and couldn't think of anything she'd rather be doing more. "It's like Cheers, everyone knows your name here," Juanny says. "The community we have is so important to me. These aren't just my customers and coworkers—they're my friends."

70%

say digital tools have been useful

70% of small businesses say digital tools have been useful to them during the COVID-19 crisis, with 30% saying digital tools have been essential.

50%+

relying more on digital tools to communicate

A majority of American small businesses are relying more on digital tools to communicate with their customers, find new customers, and sell products and services online during the COVID-19 crisis.



Sunrise Coffee | Las Vegas, NV

“The digital side of the business is what really saved us. Moreover, it opened the door to a whole new online community that is going to continue positively impacting us into the future.”

The adoption of digital tools was not a natural inclination for Juanny. “My life is all about what I can see, touch, and smell, so I approached the digital world with a little hesitation.” The more she has come to know digital tools, however, the more she has come to appreciate their value. It began when she discovered the power of her Google Business Profile, almost by accident. “I guess I set it up and forgot,” she says. “Then someone told me about these great reviews, and I was blown away.” Since then, Juanny has been proactive in updating her company’s profile and using Google Analytics to see what’s working and what isn’t. She also converted her back office into a digital office with G Suite apps like Docs, Calendar, and Drive. These tools help Juanny and her employees do everything from punching in to processing paperwork. She also began using Google Ads to bring in more customers—or, perhaps more accurately, new members of Juanny’s coffee-based community.

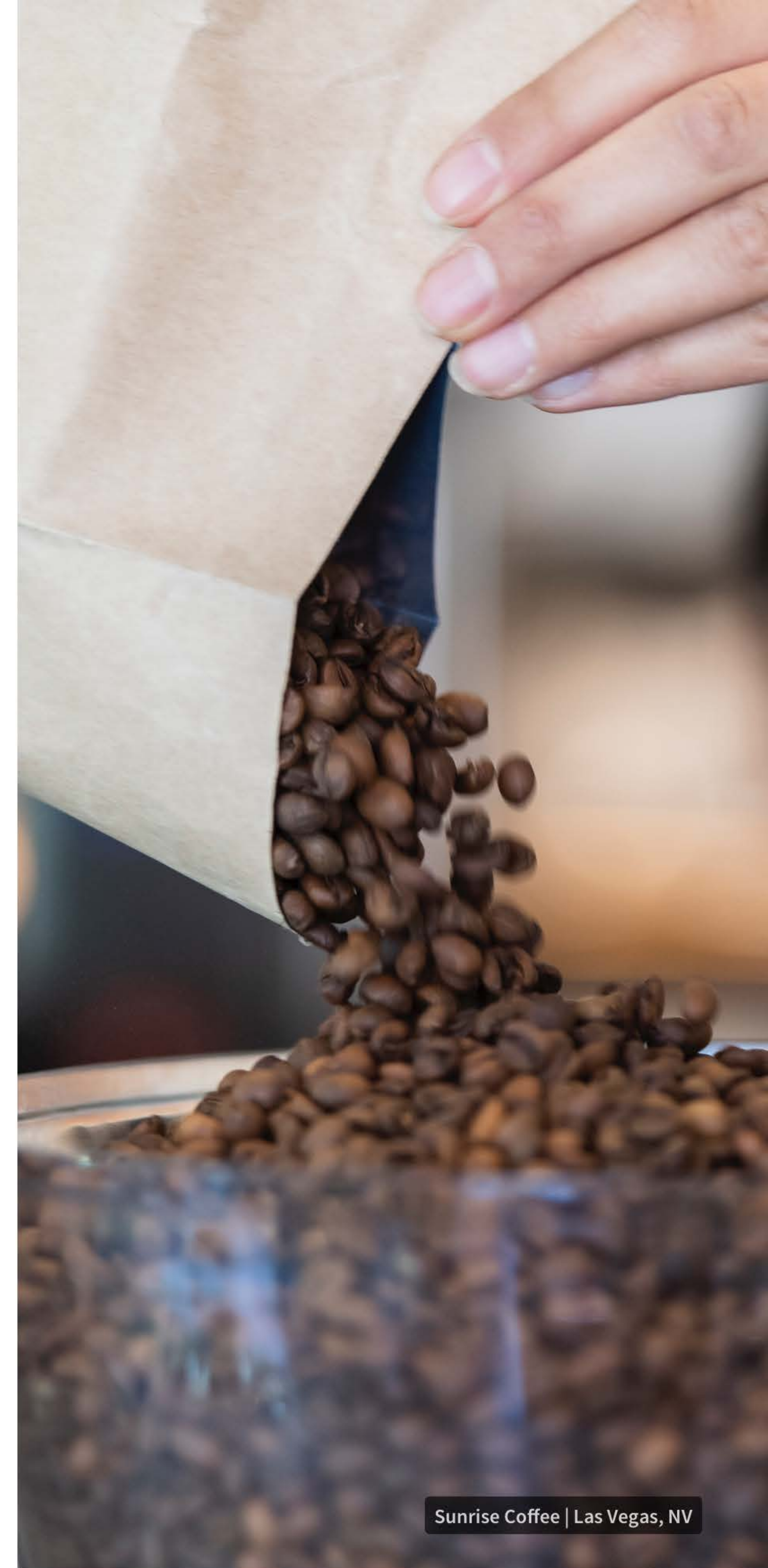
“During the good times, it’s great to be CEO because you get to drink coffee and talk,” Juanny says. “But when a crisis hits, all eyes turn to you.” And so, when the COVID pandemic came to Las Vegas, it was initially terrifying. She asked herself: What would happen to her? Her employees? Her company? Juanny knew she had to find a way to keep her company solvent. “I’d survived one recession already, but this was just a different beast altogether,” she recalls, “The digital side of the business is what really saved us. Moreover, it opened the door to a whole new online community that is going to continue positively impacting us into the future.”

Juanny began with some peace of mind knowing that her back office could continue functioning because it had gone digital. And, thanks to the online ordering capabilities she implemented

prior to the pandemic, her stores were able to continue doing business digitally. But she also needed to find a way to bring in additional revenue, so she turned to Google Trends to help her assess how best to move forward. She used this data to formulate a new social media and online advertising strategy on platforms like Facebook and Google Ads to drive customers to the part of her business that was almost entirely digital: the sustainably sourced coffee beans she sold online. She also added a web function that allowed visitors to donate coffee to first responders and healthcare workers—with Juanny kicking in two additional bags for each one donated. She was amazed at the response: Customers started flocking in droves and buying her coffee online. The media took notice as well.

“We became the coffee shop of Las Vegas because we were helping others,” Juanny says. “The sense of community I found online reminded me of why I started a coffee shop in the first place. That was not something I was expecting but it’s something I’m truly grateful to have discovered.” It also saved her company, which went from generating losses to posting a profit during the pandemic.

Juanny is eager to reconnect with her in-person community and has plans to open a new shop within the next month—and three shops within the next year. But she also plans to deepen ties with the community she discovered online. She is currently working hard to produce new products for her customers and new ways for them to donate, too. “I feel like I discovered a superpower when I found these digital tools,” Juanny says. “And I’m excited to continue using them to enhance my company and community.”



Sunrise Coffee | Las Vegas, NV

Goodr

www.goodr.co

Jasmine Crowe, CEO & Terrence Smalls,
VP, Business Development
Atlanta, GA
Technology



Every year, millions of Americans suffer from the effects of food scarcity, and yet, huge amounts of edible food are dumped in landfills. Jasmine Crowe thought that was wrong. In fact, it made her angry. And so, while feeding people on the streets of Atlanta in 2013, she decided to do something about it. Today, she is CEO of a digitally driven food-management company that has successfully diverted millions of pounds of excess food from landfills and toward those who need it most. Because her business is digital first, she has been able to continue and evolve this mission during a time of heightened food crisis.

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Goodr | Atlanta, GA

We are a digital-first business, and that is what has allowed us to continue helping others.”

In Jasmine’s view, hunger is not so much an issue of scarcity as a problem of logistics. Her solution—feed more, waste less—is the organizing principle behind Goodr, the company she launched in 2017 with the support of others who share her passion, like friend-turned-Vice President of Business Development Terrence Smalls. Goodr helps companies and organizations find ways to divert excess food to where it can be put to more positive and productive use. That usually means feeding the hungry, but in other cases it can mean creating green energy or providing feedstock for local farmers. To accomplish this, Goodr provides a secure ledger that tracks surplus food from pickup to donation. It also delivers real-time social and environmental impact reporting analytics. “We see ourselves as food’s best friend,” Jasmine says. “We want to get food to where it can do the most good, and the digitally connected tools we use allow us to do that.”

Digital tools are critical for nearly every aspect of Jasmine’s business from using Google Analytics data to determine which communities to serve, to employing Google Maps technology to provide the most optimized routes for drivers picking up excess food. Her team adopted video chatting long ago, which has proven especially helpful during the recent pandemic. This is also true of the company’s active online presence. Terrence points to LinkedIn as an important platform that has helped establish Goodr as a credible thought leader in the industry. Jasmine has long been an avid Twitter user, and she often uses the platform to spark conversations and get buy-in for Goodr’s mission from key stakeholders and companies. In just a few short years, her small company has taken off, landing big clients like the NFL while diverting millions of pounds of food that would otherwise have ended up in landfills.

Even with this success, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was an anxious and uncertain time for most Americans. Jasmine, Terrence, and their team were no exception. “At first, I was extremely worried about the business, our employees, and the mission we all care so much about,” Jasmine recalls. “But then, I realized that there is actually a great opportunity here to help Americans gain access to good food at a time when that has never been more important.” Thanks to Goodr’s digital connectivity, it was able to continue working with clients to divert food to the places it was most needed. And thanks to this connectivity, it was able to scale up from there. Jasmine reached out to businesses that suddenly found themselves shuttered and with excess food that would likely have gone to waste. Goodr decided to provide a new platform for those looking to donate groceries to families in need. “We were able to get that capability up and on our website in a matter of minutes,” she says, “and then we got the word out on Twitter.” She followed up later, sharing pictures and stories of the families helped by these donations so that those who gave could see the true impact of their generosity right there in their feed.

Goodr was founded to achieve what it calls a triple-win solution: help hungry communities in need, reduce greenhouse emissions from landfills, and find a way to help clients succeed financially—all at once. Jasmine, Terrence, and the rest of the team are proud to say they can achieve this every day, even during a time of crisis. There’s no doubt in Jasmine’s mind why that is: “We are a digital-first business, and that is what has allowed us to continue helping others.” Terrence agrees, adding that Goodr is looking to start a new campaign with Google Ads to spread some good news. “We’re now looking to the next step, which is expanding Goodr’s operations to other cities—so we can help even more communities in need.”



Goodr | Atlanta, GA

Peeko Oysters

www.peekooysters.com

Peter Stein, Owner
New Suffolk, NY
B2B / Food Services



Peter Stein has always been interested in aquaculture. He has a life-long appreciation for the environment and the natural world. So when he found himself laid off from a job in the educational software industry, he decided to turn a difficult moment into an ecologically conscious and life-changing pivot—he started an oyster farm. It foreshadowed a determined grit that would serve him well when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

Oyster farming is a tough business. It carries hours of day-to-day farm responsibilities coupled with the complicated logistics of actually getting oysters to customers—largely restaurants. Peter was new in the industry and hardly in a position to throw money at any of the challenges facing him. That’s why he was so grateful for the range of low-cost and free digital tools that

34%

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One-third (34%) of small businesses say that they will rely more on digital tools moving forward from the COVID-19 crisis.

40%

relying on digital tools for new customers

40% of small businesses say they are relying on digital tools to find new customers during the COVID-19 crisis, and 36% say they are using digital tools to pivot to online sales.



Peeko Oysters | New Suffolk, NY

“When COVID first hit, it seemed like Armageddon for my business. In a previous age, it likely would have been,” Peter says. “But digital tools allowed us to adapt and survive. Now, we have hope for the future again.”

helped him develop his business from the ground up. He began using FarmersWeb to manage the day-to-day logistics of running a small farm and moving his product to market—everything from order fulfillment and invoicing to accounts receivable. He turned to Google Docs to help manage e-commerce as well as the significant amount of regulatory reporting that a farm like his must undertake every month; he developed a centralized, customizable Google form that every employee could update in real time and send to respective agencies. Then, to market his new venture, he advertised online on social media platforms like Instagram and via digital newsletters.

“Like many small businesses, I had to do everything on a very shoestring budget, and I had a lot to get done,” Peter recalls. “I was the secretary, I was the CFO, I was the chief marketing officer, I was the farmer, I was the delivery guy, and I was the accountant. Suffice to say, I cannot envision a world in which I could have gotten my company up and running without these tools at hand.” Before long, things were looking up for Peter and Peeko Oysters. Projections showed 2020 was likely to be a banner year for the company. “We were finally at the point where we were firing on all cylinders, our customers were lined up, and we expected to do about twice as well as we had last year,” Peter recalls. “We were ready to rock and roll.”

And then, the COVID-19 crisis hit. Restaurants closed their doors, and Peter’s business skidded to an abrupt halt. “Our customers were gone in a flash. We went from doubling our sales to taking in nothing just like that,” Peter says. “I remember saying that I have got to figure out a way forward and quick.” His solution? Switch to selling directly to customers—in other words, completely change his business model on a dime. It sounds impossible, and in a pre-digital age, it probably would have been. But Peter, in his own words, “basically got a door-to-door oyster business up and running overnight using a few free and low-cost digital tools.”

From the planning and routing of deliveries to customer service and order management, Peter was able to handle it all using smartphone apps like Venmo that many use every day. He integrated Shopify into Peeko’s existing website to streamline payment processing and customer communications and, because he couldn’t afford an expensive CRM at the time, he simply created his own using Google Forms and a mail merge add-on that cost \$5 per month. Then came the challenge of letting potential customers know what he was offering. “How does a tiny little company like mine get the word out there?” he remembers wondering. Turning to his extensive network of contacts in the local community, as well as the then-shuttered restaurant industry, he asked them to consider mentioning his new venture online. Soon, organic posts on Facebook and other social networks confirmed Peter’s hunch that a large untapped market of hungry bivalve aficionados was locked in quarantine. Interest—and orders—poured in, and before long Peter was dashing across New York City with his deliveries. Of course, success always breeds new challenges, and Peter’s success in cultivating a new customer base also brought a lot of questions: namely, how do you shuck and prepare these things? His solution was again to find a free digital tool that could get the job done quickly and efficiently: in this case, YouTube. He created a channel for Peeko where he could direct customers with questions and post additional content to attract new ones—like the weekly inspiration videos he now produces, and guest content from chefs he was working with previously.

“When COVID first hit, it seemed like Armageddon for my business. In a previous age, it likely would have been,” Peter says. “While I never thought an oyster farm would need so much technology to stay afloat, digital tools are what allowed us to adapt and survive. Now, we have hope for the future again.”



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Who was involved?

Methodology

The survey was fielded online from May 6 to May 18, 2020 among a nationally representative sample of 502 US small business owners in the following census-aligned verticals: Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services, Educational Services, Accommodation and Food Services, Other Services (other than Public Administration), Retail Trade, Wholesale Trade, and Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation. Data were weighted to align with the known distribution of US small business owners in terms of business size, owner gender, race, and ethnicity, and region.



The Connected Commerce Council (3C) is a nonprofit membership organization working to promote small businesses' access to digital technologies and tools. 3C provides small businesses with access to digital tools, offers coaching to optimize growth and efficiency, and works to cultivate a policy environment that considers and respects the interests of today's small businesses.

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