

BACK TO BUSINESS IOWA PODCAST

A partnership of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and America's SBDC Iowa

SEASON 1 | EPISODE 42: Small Business Update—an Interview with Entrepreneur Lana Pol

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Description: *Lana Pol is an entrepreneur from Pella, Iowa and owns a variety of small businesses, from trucking companies to a spa and pool business. She speaks to host Steve Adams about the challenges, surprises, and learnings of managing her multiple enterprises through the COVID-19 crisis so far this year.*



[music]

Steve Adams, host 00:10

Hello, and welcome to the Back to Business Iowa podcast from Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. This podcast is a collaboration between Iowa State University Extension and Outreach and the programs including Community and Economic Development, Farm, Food and Enterprise Development, and the Iowa Small Business Development Centers. These podcasts cover relevant topics for businesses and individuals related to education, research and technical assistance during and post COVID-19.

Steve Adams, host 00:54

I'm Steve Adams, field specialist three at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, part of the Community and Economic Development unit and your host for these podcasts. Today we'll be speaking with Lana Pol, entrepreneur extraordinaire out of Pella, Iowa, about her variety of businesses and how those have all fared during this pandemic. First of all, Lana, thanks for being with us here today.

Lana Pol 01:21

Thank you for having me.

Steve Adams, host 01:24

So can you tell us how many businesses you actually own and what types of businesses they are?

Lana Pol 01:31

Sure, I actually own five different businesses. The first one was started in 1972 by my father and my three brothers. And that is called Geetings Incorporated. And we're a trucking company, basically regional area. And then we have GI Warehouse that we have warehouses in Pella and Knoxville, formed in 1975. Our next business is Mowbility Sales and Service. We sell outdoor power equipment, we sell trailers, [unclear], a little variety of everything. With that we're in Pella and Des Moines.

Lana Pol 02:06

And we have Creative Inspirations. We do embroidery, we do promotional materials, we do outsourcing for some companies of different things. And then we have Odyssey Spas here in Pella, where we also sell swimming pools and spas.

Steve Adams, host 02:22

So do you operate these businesses under a holding company? Or have you operated them as separate entities owned by the same person?

Lana Pol 02:31

Right, we actually have two separate corporations, and then we have two LLCs underneath one of the corporations.

Steve Adams, host 02:40

Okay, all right, that makes sense. Well, once a pandemic took over the economy, were you able to get any stimulus assistance under the Paycheck Protection Program or the Economic Injury Disaster Loan program?

Lana Pol 02:54

Yes, we actually did apply and receive the Paycheck Protection Program, which was extremely helpful to us in the beginning.

Steve Adams, host 03:02

Great, great. So did you use these stimulus programs for payroll primarily, or utilities or mortgage rent payments, that type of thing? Or was it kind of a combination of all three?

Lana Pol 03:13

We actually used ours just for payroll.

Steve Adams, host 03:16

Okay, just for payroll. All right. And have you made application for the forgivable part of that payroll protection?

Lana Pol 03:23

Yes, it's in the process right now.

Steve Adams, host 03:26

Okay, so some of the people we've talked to have actually already had their loans forgiven. Some are kind of in the queue, so to speak, and are being tracked by those various businesses. So you've applied, you just have not heard yet on whether you've actually gotten the forgiveness part of it?

Lana Pol 03:42

Right. Our banker said that he's just starting now to get some of them back on the ones that they had turned in.

Steve Adams, host 03:49

Okay. All right. Well, so I know Congress is talking about this right now. If there's a third stimulus package that would possibly refund these programs for a period of time, do you think you might reapply?

Lana Pol 04:02

No, I don't think we will have to unless things really get bad and we have to shut down. But as of right now, we're doing okay with all of our businesses.

Steve Adams, host 04:10

Well, that's terrific news. That kind of leads to my next question here. Were there things out there that surprised you about your various entities during the pandemic? And did some do better than others? And were there other surprises you ran into along the way?

Lana Pol 04:25

Absolutely. I think one of the things that scared us at first when we heard about it was our Mowbility stores, you know, just being in that field, were just curious whether they'd be able to stay open or not. And so we really were very concerned about keeping those open. We assumed that the trucking probably would, and we weren't sure where the warehousing site would be at, so we were amazed the our Mowbility stores actually doubled this year in revenue.

Lana Pol 04:57

I think a lot of people are doing more home projects. We are selling completely different items that we've done before. So that was a big surprise. Trucking took a little hit for a little while, and now it's come back and it's very, very strong. And now we're seeing on the warehousing side, it's actually going down. So it's been a very interesting mix in all of our businesses this year.

Steve Adams, host 05:21

Well, with juggling all those balls in the air, so to speak, how well do you sleep at night? I'm just kind of curious.

Lana Pol 05:27

[Laughter] Well, I don't sleep a lot. I actually was on a meeting with Senator Rubio earlier this weekend, when I told him about my business. And he goes, he said, What do you do for your spare time? I said, I just drink a lot.

Steve Adams, host 05:41

[Laughter] I think everybody's consumption probably has gone up a little bit on that end as well. So we've heard from a variety of our guests over this podcast series that they've had to kind of pivot or change their business model in order to accommodate the consumer. And I know it's a strange environment for everybody. In what ways have you changed or pivoted from the way you were previously doing business?

Lana Pol 06:12

Really, the biggest thing that we're doing is, we're doing a little more for online sales. And we're actually getting set up so we can do more of that, especially with the Creative Inspirations. You know, we had a little bit of a storefront for part of it and of course, that had to close down for a while. And so we started doing a lot more online.

Lana Pol 06:32

We also started looking at what products were selling and in that we ended up doing a lot of masks. Kids were going back to school, we decided, let's do masks with kids' names on it, so teachers could learn who they were, and they, other kids could know who they were. And that became a major part of our business. And we noticed in Mowbility that we ended up selling different products, such as we sold a lot of tillers this year, which we normally don't. So that's been the biggest thing that we've pivoted so far.

Steve Adams, host 07:03

Well, you mentioned the tilling, you know, I noticed in some of the stores that managers are complaining of a Mason jar shortage. And going into the gardening centers, if you weren't there early, you didn't get peppers or tomatoes, because they'd all been picked through. So that tiller thing, and then you also mentioned that your outdoor business from people doing home renovation projects or maybe additions to their outdoor living spaces had jumped. So did that surprise you, did that come out of the blue or were you kind of expecting some of that?

Lana Pol 07:36

No, I think that actually really surprised us. You know, I guess I didn't have a vision of what that was going to look like. And then the biggest thing we had this year was, you know, selling spas. It's been crazy, because we haven't been able to get any and we just finally got our first load in about two weeks ago. And every one was sold, and now we got a second load in and it's sold. And it wasn't anything that we were looking for before, you know, on even swimming pools, there was just so much more demand for so much of that. So it definitely took us by surprise.

Steve Adams, host 08:09

So do you have a backlog then? Are you booked out for six, nine months in that regard?

Lana Pol 08:14

We're booked out, actually, we sell Caldera spas, and they are getting orders in for 450 a day and they can produce 300 a day. So we are about a year out for anything new that we order right now.

Steve Adams, host 08:31

Well, that's kind of good news. You know, you got something coming down the pike over this next 12 months. Do you feel like your customers have adapted to the changes you've made in your business model?

Lana Pol 08:42

I think for the most part. Probably the hardest thing is, you know, just the whole supply chain. There's so many things not coming through, whether it's parts or you know, different products that we have. That's been the hardest thing is, we need to fix the lawn mowers, to say, you know, we can't get the parts in. So that's been a little harder for customers. But I think, you know, I think they're all starting to realize that it's just the way the world is right now.

Steve Adams, host 09:07

I've noticed and heard some of the same comments being made by some of the regional lumber yards, it's just hard to get product in and again, it's a supply chain situation. So you're dealing with some of those same things, obviously. So well, I always hear small business owners say that the most difficult part of owning any business—and you own five, obviously—is the recruitment and retention of quality employees. Has this been a challenge for you at all during this period? And what have you done to kind of secure those most valuable employees?

Lana Pol 09:43

You know, I don't know that we've seen anything different now than we saw before. And that's always been an issue especially, you know, in the mechanic field is probably our biggest one to get qualified employees in. And I've not noticed that it's been worse right now. We've been able to maintain.

Lana Pol 10:00

I think one of the key things with employees is being able to pay a good wage, you know, have good benefits, and treat them like humans, you know, instead of a number. And so that's how we try and retain our employees.

Steve Adams, host 10:15

Well that's great news as well. How have you communicated to your employees and your customers that safety is your primary concern during COVID-19?

Lana Pol 10:26

Well, we've done a lot, you know, starting at first, my daughter and I both were just listening to everything we could possibly listen to, to make sure we were staying up to date. We were closing down our buildings, you know, not allowing people in, trying to keep our employees safe with masks, with cleaning supplies, and just letting them know that anytime, you know, they needed something to let us know. And we've had a few people with scares within their family with COVID, you know, and they've all done a really good job. I've not had one employee not wanting to come to work, you know, so we've been very fortunate there.

Steve Adams, host 11:06

You are, and especially with the with five businesses. Just out of curiosity, how many total employees do you have, Lana?

Lana Pol 11:13

We have 61.

Steve Adams, host 11:15

61. Okay. All right. That's a good sized amount of labor there. I'm also kind of guessing back in January or February, you had no idea of the challenges that might be rolling your way this year. So how would you say that things have gone so far?

Lana Pol 11:32

Yeah, you're very right, if we would have ever even thought this was going to happen this year! And I would say that really, it's gone well. It's definitely been a challenge, you know, we've spent lots and lots of hours with communication, with trying to solve problems through this. But I would say its rolled very well for us.

Steve Adams, host 11:53

Terrific. Well, I know you're not an economist, either, but what kind of is your business forecast for, let's say, in the next 6 to 12 or even 24 months? What do you see coming?

Lana Pol 12:06

Right now I think things are getting stronger. I see the supply chains getting better. Going forward, I guess I'm a little, still a little concerned. You know, I don't know what's going to happen after the election. I'm concerned If COVID gets worse, you know, are we going to see more shutdowns around the United States? So I'm really, you know, not 100% optimistic, you know, where we'll be at or what the future looks like at this point.

Steve Adams, host 12:34

Well, that's so true. And I think we're all just kind of taking a wait-and-see attitude as we've kind of come to realize, COVID is in charge. We're not, right? I mean...

Lana Pol 12:45

That's exactly right. It is definitely changed...probably, in my lifetime I've never seen anything that's changed the world like this has.

Steve Adams, host 12:55

I would agree. So are there best practices that you've been able to come across that you would recommend to our listeners when it comes to how to manage a business during COVID-19?

Lana Pol 13:08

I think the biggest thing is to make sure you're up to date on everything that's happening, you know, what the trends are around, you know, especially around us knowing, you know, are we seeing more and more positive cases? Being communicative to our employees, any of our suppliers, if we have any issues or anything. I think that's the biggest thing, is just keeping up on everything and making sure communications are open with everyone.

Steve Adams, host 13:37

Yeah, I think some of us are starting to feel like we've got a little news or information overload going on. But you're right, staying on top of that is essential. So Lana, I gotta tell you, I want to thank you for spending so much time with us today and sharing in some of your personal insight into business management, especially inside this pandemic. It was extremely informative, and I really appreciate your time today.

Lana Pol 14:02

Thank you.

Steve Adams, host 14:04

Well, let's just say if someone wanted to visit with you more about how you've handled the juggling of multiple businesses, or they just simply wanted to talk a little shop with you, what's the best way for them to reach out to you?

Lana Pol 14:17

Sure. They can give me a call here at Geetings Incorporated, and my number is 641-628-1535, extension three.

Steve Adams, host 14:30

Well, there you go. And it's Geetings. It's like greetings without an R, right?

Lana Pol 14:34

That is correct.

Steve Adams, host 14:35

All right. That's how you explained your email address to me, as I recall. [laughter] Lana, thanks again, this has been great. We do appreciate your time.

Lana Pol 14:45

Well, thank you, Steve.

Steve Adams, host 14:47

On a programming note, please listen in over the next couple of weeks, as we're going to start a series of podcasts directly related to childcare and its impacts on working Iowa families. So all I can say to you, folks, is stay tuned. If you have any questions about this Back to Business Iowa podcast, please feel free to contact me, Steve Adams, at stadams@iastate.edu. And as always, thanks for listening.

Steve Adams, host 15:18

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Steve Adams, host 15:58

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