

6/1/2020

The Easiest Thing

Ellen C. Wells



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I was reading an article this morning about a local Cape Cod ice cream shop. Now, before we go on there's something about Cape Cod you should know. The folks there know how to make ice cream. And the locals and summer visitors know how to eat it. Folks crowd these mom-and-pop shops after a day at the beach. Or if the weather is bad, they'll keep the line constant all day long.

Whether it's a walk-up stand or a full-on parlor with seating, you'll get the same dedicated customers who faithfully claim their favorite shop has the best scoops on all of the Cape. These seasonal shops are so beloved I bet they'd have only a small downtick during the winter months. But the scoopers need time to rest their forearm muscles, after all. Come May, though, the locals get antsy and the shutters fly open. It's ice cream season.

When COVID-19 hit, most of the Cape's creameries were closed—much like many of our seasonal garden centers. Unlike full-service eating establishments, these shops had some additional time to assess how to make the ice cream and serve it in a COVID-complying way. If they opened, it wouldn't be business as usual, for sure. How should the orders be placed? Where should people wait before and after ordering? How do you perform your job as efficiently as possible but with completely new restrictions? How do you keep both staff and customers safe?

The ice cream shop garnered a feature in the national press not because it figured out the perfect solutions to all of those questions, but because they were confronted with more questions and situations than they could have imagined. My understanding is that the shop gave the community notice they were opening, how orders would be taken and that they had new operating procedures. The owner had just half of his regular scoopers on duty, while the other half of staff took orders and delivered them to waiting vehicles. Once the shop opened—the Friday before Mother's Day—all their well-laid plans began to unravel. Customers were showing up without having already placed orders. They became irate when they had to wait. They lashed out at staff and management with some wickedly inappropriate language. The shop that had been the steadfast neighborhood ice cream joint for two decades decided to close indefinitely after being open for just one day*.

The easiest thing to do is to do nothing. The ice cream parlor folks did the hard thing. They put in the work. The devised plans. The assessed risks and decided that opening for their customers with their plans in place was the right thing to do.

The customers who showed up for ice cream that first day did the easy thing, which was nothing. They did not

change their expectations. They did not consider that the new rules applied to them. They did not show compassion for the management and staff who were all working through difficulties. And because their ice cream shop changed and they didn't, the customers blew their tops. Or lost their marbles. Either is appropriate here.

Much of this uncouth behavior can be chalked up to cabin fever, working/schooling from home exhaustion and economic/social frustrations. I get that. But the folks who hold on to "normal" when the whole world has just had to pivot on a dime? They'd do well to take some advice from that other "frozen" delight, Elsa, and just "let it go." No use in yelling over melted ice cream. **GP**

** The good news in this story is that an overwhelming amount of support helped ownership screw up enough courage to open for Mother's Day.*