



Adams & Butler are a small company of 10 employees. We have been in business for over 18 years and I myself have worked in the industry since 1989. We have been hit a double-whammy with Covid-19, as we are both a Private Travel Designer in Ireland with Irish clients, and an incoming tour operator into Ireland, the UK and Africa for private International clients, and on behalf of travel agents around the world who ask us to design customized itineraries for their clients.

The Business

We design itineraries for our clients that others simply cannot, whether around a theme, a private experience or meeting people who are not normally accessible to the public. We do stuff that is unique and not the usual, taking footfall away from over-visited sites to lesser known gems, enabling smaller local communities and businesses to survive and thrive. Our clients not only see and do when they travel, but also feel and engage. We are seriously into sustainability and are regarded as specialists in this field. Our mission is to offer a seamless travel experience to our clients based on our values of integrity, trust, creativity and value for money.

The positive is that we have a good reputation, which stands to us at times like this, as we are the only Irish Travel + Leisure A-List Travel Advisor, and recently won Best Travel Agent Professional at the Irish Travel Trade Awards 2020. The negative is that the world has now stopped travelling and all our clients, from every market, have been affected. Travel has grown to a halt. Our income has not just decreased but has stopped completely. Zilch. Nada. We had survived and indeed thrived, in the doldrums before, as the company had been conceived post 9/11 and cut its teeth as a toddler in the recession of 2008, and this did reassure me a little.

Friday the 13th

On Friday the 13th (ironically) of March, as soon as we had an inkling of what was coming, we immediately held a town-hall crisis meeting. We focused on what we could do, rather what we couldn't. We knew we would have an influx of cancellations, but we also knew that crises mean change, and all change brings new opportunities. This could also be the time to be

extremely proactive, and figure what projects deserved more of our attention, based on relevance to our future planning and strategy. We had to work this crisis.

We knew we didn't want to cut the workforce as it would have a negative effect on morale, but also knew drastic steps had to be taken. We made the decision to work from home and to go down to a three-day week initially and see how that would go.

The Financial Impact

I had never really taken much out of the company only paying myself a bonus once in 17 years. In fact, it was only recently that I had started paying myself a decent wage. Everything I had was in the company and we were cash rich. I sought advice from an independent financial advisor who said that from a cold business viewpoint I would be better off liquidating the company. I had no creditors; I could refund the clients and take the proceeds and avail of the 10% CGT Entrepreneur Relief rate. Otherwise everything I have, would dwindle away over the unforeseeable next few months.

I was better off at that stage making the team redundant and cutting any potential losses rather than struggling to hold on to my business. Every day with no income coming in I would become poorer. I couldn't fathom at that time, how I was encouraged to lay people off but not keep them on. The government by doing the right thing in providing and guaranteeing income for their people, had encouraged companies to lay them off. Companies at that stage were not being enticed to stay in business. Yet we, the SMEs were and would be the lifeline of the country and the economy, in the years to come.

I spoke to fellow businesspeople and many said that I should seriously consider that option, that I was well regarded internationally and would easily find a position, and that since my family were grown and I had no ties, I could get a lucrative contract abroad.

In my heart and soul, I knew and know, that I had never set up the company to make money. I really do believe that we provide a service to our clients that very few other companies do. We have always put people first, whether it is our own people, our clients or our suppliers. Relationships are paramount in everything we do. We have a robust culture and are a flat structured organization. We have a fun almost family-like atmosphere where every team member is equally respected and supported. Our strong multi-talented, multi-cultured (comprising of eight nationalities) individual players are a unified goal-driven team with a common purpose. We hire for the fit with our culture and not for the skill set. New employees grow in confidence and take an active role in growth. We trust our people and they deliver. I couldn't let them down.

Brand, Positivity and Communications

We determined that the three things to focus on were the strength of our brand, positivity and communications. We split the team into project sub teams; Website Development and African Product, Exclusive-Use Rental Properties and CRM eMarketing. We weren't happy but neither were we particularly unhappy with our website, but we knew it wasn't achieving its potential in attracting the more lucrative B2C private clients. Our African side of the business was booming but we hadn't had time to expand the product. We are the only African Travel specialist in

Ireland and the team had spent so much time and money visiting the continent and our suppliers this year but hadn't had the time up until now to put it all together.

When I had originally set up the company back in 2003, our sole specialization was exclusive-use properties in Ireland and Britain, and we were probably the only travel company who knew those elegant and charming properties really well. As far back as January, almost pre Covid, we noticed the trend increasing for this type of property, especially as clients are not only more concerned with limiting the amount of interaction with others, but are also experiencing overwhelming desires to be cocooned with their loved ones, and exclusive-use rentals satisfy both those conflicting longings. The final area was our CRM. We needed to clean it, add to it and segment it. Our newsletters are one of our biggest sources of enquiries. On Monday the 16th, we packed up our computers and office equipment and all said goodbye not knowing when we would meet again.

First and foremost, we drew up a 100% credit postponement policy for all bookings for 12 months which we have renamed our Adams & Butler Goodwill Policy. Unexpectedly, we got plaudits for it from the industry worldwide. Out of the hundreds of bookings we have, only three have cancelled up until now. We wanted our clients to know that they can rest assured that whatever the world and fate throws at us, we are there to help them in whatever way we can, both now and in the future, when they want to travel again.

Since then, we have all calmed down a little, as our clients and bookings have been taken care of. The new measure by the government to refund 70% of salaries has enabled all our team to go back to working an 8-hour day. The government with this decision has allowed my company to survive, and me not to be punished for continuing to trade. We are presently ensconced in our homes and all the phones are manned. Every day we have a Teams meeting at 9.30 and then work on our team projects. The atmosphere is positive and productive. We were written about in CNN this week which lifted the mood too.

We are now looking to a future when our present industriousness will bear fruit. Surprisingly, enquiries have already started trickling in again, but for travel in the Winter and 2021.

This year for our industry will be the lost year.

[*Note: This article was written exclusively for, and published by, the Institute of Directors in Ireland.](#)