

Continually re-inventing the wheel

By **BROCK WEIR**

Occasionally having to reinvent the wheel can be frustrating, but it is often a necessary evil.

The last twelve months have proved that with maddening regularity.

If you had called me a creature of routine over a year ago, I probably would have made a half-hearted attempt to deny it. After all, one of the best things about being in this job is never having time or monotony enough to get in a rut.

Sure, there were days where a routine was more invariable than others; the appointed day of the week when this paper has to get to press, is just one that comes to mind. But the other four, five, six days of the week often offered seemingly endless possibilities.

There were community events to cover, behind-the-scenes stories to suss out and uncover, people to meet, their stories to glean, and, ultimately, their stories to tell.

Rarely was a day exactly like another. It kept things fresh and, for us, engaged and involved.

Today, those chances to meet up over coffee to talk to somebody about the issues that are on their mind, opportunities to get out and sift through archives in person, or take out the camera to capture images an event or more than a handful of people, are few and far between.

When last March came around, and our first stay-at-home orders were issued, I would be lying if I said I wasn't a little scared. We all were. I would also be lying if I said I never had an emotional moment about it all. I'm sure we all did. And yes, there would be no point in denying a bit of panic set in when the realities of not being able to cover, uncover and share in the traditional methods were pulled out from under me like a rug if I was a film extra indulging in a little Three Stoogery.

But developing a new routine in the new reality fostered a sense of calm. All it took was a bit of time.

Eventually, the norms around traditional photo opportunities were re-thought and rolled out. Tools that were necessary but hadn't yet been digitized were quickly sorted. And meeting up with people once again to get valuable input on events facing this community resumed, once people gained some degree of comfort with technology such as Zoom that was now an inextricable point of our day-to-day lives.

In short order, one of the many questions that kept me up at night ? ?How am I going to fill these pages with nothing going on?? ? subsided, and not just because the evolving realities of the global pandemic, including how the community was answering calls to action, provided no dearth of things to write about.

We were lucky, of course, that we didn't have to completely re-invent that pesky wheel.

Sure, there was a bit of a reconfiguration of how we in the office communicated, particularly those of us who had to collaborate directly face-to-face, yet we were quick studies, got the job done, and a new template evolved organically. Okay, so the routine sometimes veers close to monotony, particularly this past week where I had eleven Zoom meetings spread over two days which left me feeling contemptuous of the four walls of my home office, but then's the breaks.

Others, such as our retail and service business owners, have not been as fortunate.

There is no doubt in anyone's minds that retail, particularly small businesses, have been particularly hard-hit by the pandemic. With

limited opportunities to welcome customers into stores for face-to-face interaction, owners, managers and staff have had to reinvent the wheels that had previously served them well time and time again.

Some outlets, if they have the space, have found success in the curbside pickup model. Others have had better luck making deliveries to customers who have stood by them through this challenging time. Restaurants have been able to maintain some cash flow with take-out options, but some businesses are better placed to adapt than others.

Consider your local shoe store. How comfortable would you be buying footwear that you weren't able to try on and get a feel for before purchase? I, unfortunately, know what my answer would be.

As of 12.01 a.m. on Monday, business owners in neighbouring York Region were tasked with executing another transformation. Between Friday and the dawn of a new day on February 22, those who have had their livelihoods all but shuttered for nearly two months have had to re-learn the rules of the game, preparing to re-welcome customers and clients into their workplaces with new protocols, new capacity limits and, more likely than not, new expectations from those looking to do business.

Coupled with these challenges, they also need to consider the challenge and risk of customers coming in from COVID-19 hotspots like the Region of Peel and the City of Toronto still under lockdown, despite pleas from Public Health officials.

Part of the challenge is inconsistent messaging from the Provincial government.

The piecemeal approach taken by the Government only sows confusion: schools opening back up to in-person learning when communities are still under lockdown, regions coming out of lockdown when surrounding communities are at different levels of Ontario's COVID-19 framework despite similar numbers, and treating some types of retail as more equal than others.

Last week, I was asked by a co-worker if being the editor of three newspapers in three different communities which, come next week, could be at three different levels of the framework was in any way confusing? It certainly can be, and I can only imagine how much of a challenge it is, and will continue to be, for business owners to not only keep track of what is now required of them, but to instill consumer confidence and feel comfortable that they have the resources they need to keep themselves and their employees safe.

'While the trends in public health indicators are heading in the right direction, we still have work to do,' said Dr. Dave Williams, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health. 'Everyone is strongly advised to continue staying at home, avoid social gatherings, only travel between regions for essential purposes, and limit close contacts to your household or those you live with.'

Avoiding social gatherings should be relatively simple at this point, as is limiting close contacts to your households or those you live with, but discouraging travel between regions outside of essential purposes will be a tall order when residents of Toronto and Peel have the opportunity to experience a return to some degree of retail normalcy just across the street.

It might temporarily be a boon to business in York and South Simcoe, but it could pose a significant challenge at the community level; a challenge that is unavoidable without a consistent approach, response and message. Until then, on top of everything else, all we can do is support another round of reinvention.