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Pandemic can't stop Chobani's community impact



A Chobani employee helps load a vehicle with cases of Greek yogurt during the company's annual holiday giveaway at the fairgrounds in Norwich.

BY SHAWN MAGRATH
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SOUTH EDMESTON - Like every industry, Chobani faced unprecedented ebb and flow in 2020. The company touted a successful launch of several new products outside of its staple line of Greek yogurt, elevated its workforce, and took generous measures to support local communities - all while curbing the threat of a global pandemic at one of Chenango County's largest workplaces.

Chobani's year has been trying indeed. But the company's nameplate has never been defined by the challenges it faces, say company spokesmen.

Instead, it's defined by how the company responds to those challenges. And Chobani, they say, has responded strongly with significant investments in its people, communities, and innovation.

"It's been a pretty intense and exciting year for us, despite the fact that we're operating in these really challenging, uncertain times," said Mark

Broadhurst, Chobani's vice president of corporate affairs. "There's a lot of hurt that continues as a consequence of the pandemic ... What we set out to say is, 'We're in this for the long haul.' Not only for our employees, but for our communities."

From the onset of the pandemic, Chobani laid out a four-pronged approach to handle it. First and foremost was the protection of its employees. Second, the company sought to keep its plants up and running. Third, it kept up distribution to supermarkets

across the country. And lastly, it recognized a need to care for local communities, which it did through the donation of nearly 7 million Chobani products coast to coast.

"Community has been important to Chobani from day one," said Broadhurst, citing Chobani's significant investments in community efforts over the last 12 months. The company has regularly donated products to school lunch programs locally and regionally, on the East coast as well as

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Year plagued by COVID makes way for more promising 2021 in downtown Greene

BY SHAWN MAGRATH
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GREENE - It's a scene America's downtowns have come to know all too well - small businesses shuttered by the pandemic, a nonexistent nightlife, and a once bustling Main Street that's seemingly gone by the wayside.

This is the story of COVID-19 for small business hubs, and the Village of Greene has been no exception. The last year has been one unavoidable challenge after another for Greene's business district. And it's been tough for many business



Despite a year of hardships for Greene's business district, the Sherwood Hotel - a notable landmark in downtown Greene - got a promising start under new ownership in 2020.

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COMMUNITY VIEWPOINT



Kerri Green President & CEO Commerce Chenango

There are some similarities between the military and the Girl Scouts. I can attest to this, because I am an Army veteran, and once upon a time I was a proud girl scout - at least through middle school. The first obvious similarity is that there's a uniform. In fact, they both were green and both were covered in patches, buttons and markings to note your status, rank and achievements.

Another similarity? Both institutions trained you to always be prepared. It was at the heart of everything we did. When I was a kid it was easier to be prepared ... was it my week for snack? Did my mom sign my permission slip? Where's my sash? In the Army, being prepared took on a completely new meaning. You were prepared to fight at the first sign of trouble. You were prepared to pack a bag at a moment's notice - part of why they teach you to roll your clothes so nicely - still a handy tool when you travel. You were prepared to don a gas mask very quickly, hence the bivouac trainings and "attacks" in the middle of the night. If you happened to fall asleep and roll over on top of your mask, you would regret it later; which is probably why I never slept during these excursions. I am not really sure why a quarter had to bounce off of our freshly made bed - no idea what we were preparing for with that trick, but I am ready regardless.

Being prepared is something I think most of us strive to be, and our businesses do that too. That's why they create business plans, marketing plans, staffing plans, budgets and schedules, and policies.

If 2020 showed us anything, it was that even the best of plans are meaningless when a pandemic literally stops the world in its tracks. Too often, when we talk about the pandemic or 2020 in general, negative comments and opposition usually follow it. Not only did Commerce Chenango grow, thrive and achieve some amazing things this past year, but our businesses did as well.

Creating their own playbook, many businesses thought outside the box on how to provide services to their customers, despite the regulations and executive orders coming down from the state. Many provided curbside service and pickups, even delivery services when they had not previously done so. Those who had traditionally not utilized the web found ways to promote their products and services digitally. Many, for the first time, moved to social media platforms to promote their work.

In addition to these marketing and promotion innovations from our small business owners, I would be remiss not to provide an equal round of applause to our large businesses.

Manufacturing, healthcare, finance and agriculture make up a large portion of our business demographics here in Chenango County. Many people in and around the county depend on them for employment. These large employers quickly pivoted their employment model to meet the needs of their customers and their organizations. From providing remote learning and working options, to

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Despite the pandemic, Saturdays in the Park with Chobani took place in downtown Norwich in the fall of 2020, in partnership with the Norwich Business Improvement District.



Chobani employees show off just a handful of the 5,000 free cases of Greek yogurt that were handed out during the company's annual holiday giveaway in December.

Pandemic can't stop Chobani's local impact —

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around their second production plant in Twin Falls, ID. It's donated to food security and welfare programs, including Meals on Wheels and senior centers. It's given to hospital workers and handed out free products at community giveaways. In July, Chobani even announced that it would additionally donate 100 percent of profits from a limited edition yogurt flavor to Feeding America, a nationwide network of food banks that provides food to people in need.

More locally, Chobani has doled out \$200,000 to stimulate economic development and entrepreneurship in Chenango County and in bordering Madison, Delaware, and Otsego counties. Of that, the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Chenango County received more than \$63,000 to fund education of farmers for beef and sheep production. Another \$28,600 was given to the Charlotte Valley Central School District to support ag programs and buy a food trailer; and more than \$69,000 went to Clear Path for Veterans to purchase a food trailer so that the organization could serve hot meals to area veterans. The remainder supported

efforts of the Center for Agricultural Development and Entrepreneurship.

Chobani has also become a model of successful public-private partnerships. Work on a new fire station and community center in the Village of New Berlin is well underway - a project that Chobani partly funded with the help of other local employers and the State of New York. The 7,000 square-foot firehouse includes truck bays, offices, and training space. The community center will be available to community and business events when it opens later this year.

Broadhurst said he hopes other companies see Chobani as a shining example of the good created by such public-private partnerships, urging other companies to follow suit.

Charity and community aside, Chobani - like any employer - is dealing with the blows caused by the coronavirus pandemic. And that, said Broadhurst, has steered a brunt of the company's attention toward its lifeblood: the employees.

"For us, it's been paramount. The health and safety of our employees has always been number one. But boy, is it more so in a pandemic," Broadhurst said. "In every cloud

there's a silver lining. One of the wonderful things to come out of this is that we always thought of our plant workers as heroes. But the rest of the country has now come to think of plant workers, people who distribute food, farmers - we now call them what they really are. They're essential workers."

By October, seven months after the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered schools and businesses across the country, Chobani sales suffered scarcely a dent. In fact, due to restrictions on the restaurant industry, food makers like Chobani fared pretty well since people often headed to the grocery store instead of eating out. The company even added staff to meet demand in recent months.

So what does a company like Chobani do with extra revenue floating in? "We invested in people," Broadhurst said. In the midst of the pandemic, Chobani donated millions of products nationwide and shelled out money for quarterly bonuses for its employees, purchased meals and grocery store items, offered a childcare stipend, and most notably raised its starting wage for employees to \$15 an

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hour (bringing the average hourly wage to \$19 per hour at a workplace where roughly 70 percent of the employees are paid hourly).

"This moment of uncertainty is a call for us to join together to strengthen communities and support those working tirelessly to make the food on the tables of families across America," Chobani Founder and CEO Hamdi Ulukaya said when the company moved to raise its wages four months ago. "Businesses should serve the people and communities in which they operate. Rising our base starting salary is the right thing to do and we hope other businesses, particularly food manufacturers, feel the same as we all work toward rebuilding our country."

"A lot of food companies are doing okay through the pandemic," Broadhurst added. "We try to make the point that if you are in the food industry and you are doing well, you should step up and take care of your

employees. That's something that's always been important to us, and it's something that we'll continue."

Caring for their employees is what's helped Chobani thrive in the food industry since its founding in 2005. Today, Chobani is the leading Greek yogurt brand and the second largest yogurt manufacturer in the U.S. In 2020, Chobani finally took measures to widen its footprint in the food market by venturing into the world of dairy and plant-based creamers, plant-based beverages, and most recently, cold brew coffee.

"We have evolved into what we call a 'modern food company,'" Broadhurst explained. And as for what's in store for 2021? "Stay tuned," he said. "Innovation has always been a differentiator for us ... We're gaining ground and proud that we're growing in all these categories."

Of course the reality of the pandemic hasn't escaped Chobani. It's been

a trying year. Company leaders say they're well aware of the difficulty they'll likely face in 2021, despite encouraging news of new vaccines to combat COVID-19. Broadhurst says Chobani's ready and eager to help local and state governments in any capacity within their power to encourage vaccinations in their workforce and in their community.

As Chobani continues to evolve, its mission remains the same: promote healthy food choices and cultivate positive change. At the end of the day, that's what the company is all about, said Broadhurst.

"We've looked at things. We've prioritized things. We've done things differently," he said. "But all the while, we've kept true to our principles and values. It's not easy; it's hard work. It's expensive. It costs money to take care of our employees and to give back. But it's the right thing to do, and that's where we'll always be."



Chobani donated \$200,000 to several different central NY community groups in November 2020. The Cornell Cooperative Extension of Chenango County received more than \$63,000 for educational programs for farmers interested in establishing beef or sheep production.

Community Viewpoint —

Kerri Green, President & CEO Commerce Chenango

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flexible schedules and shifting of staff, they were able to keep their companies running, while keeping the safety of their employees at the forefront. Every business owner, manager or human resource professional I spoke to always said "our employees' health and safety need to come first." They did what had to be done, and allowed for their employees to work in a new way to meet the needs of their customers in a safe way.

Think about how the pandemic has forever changed the face of our businesses. While many are slowly crawling back to the way they ran pre-pandemic, others are taking what they learned to pave the way for a new future. What an opportunity this was! Listen, I am not saying that the pandemic was great. It was a horrible year, full of fear, anxiety and stress that we are all still dealing with. However, we were given a unique opportunity to rethink our business model, mission, and operations from the bottom up, and had no other option but to change.

I'll bet there is someone right now reading this that thought, "I would never let my staff work from home – no way." Well, guess what? You just did! You may have been forced to, but you did it and it was okay. Think about what a model like this could do for workforce retention and attraction for your company. Especially for a generation that we know is looking for quality of life in their job, not simply climbing a corporate ladder.

Maybe you thought "I don't see how a website or social media can affect my bottom line. Who has time for that?" Now look back to the likes, tweets, shares, and comments that some of your posts generated. How have you integrated this into your marketing plan, and what can you bring forward into this new year?

There was no way to plan for 2020. We all did the best we could with the tools and resources we had. We leaned on each other, supported each other, cried or yelled at each other. We made donations, masks, signs and food. Many of us juggled work with our children learning remotely, and then we cried about how we were failing as a parent because, despite how amazing we think we are, we just can't be two places at once.

This is a shout out to those businesses, small and large, that did what needed to be done in 2020. It is through your determination, innovation and creativity that we now hold a playbook for the future. It may be beaten up, lots of cross outs, inserted pages and big scribbles, but we have it nonetheless. Thank you for believing in yourself, each other, and continuing to believe that you can succeed in Chenango County.

Forever a Girl Scout,
~ Kerri

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Year plagued by COVID makes way for more promising 2021 in downtown Greene —

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owners to find a silver lining, notably those whose businesses may have struggled even before the pandemic started.

Nowhere has the pandemic been more devastating than the theatre industry which, after being shut down for nearly a year, is still waiting for its curtain call - even as other businesses have gradually re-opened. At the Chenango River Theatre just outside Greene village limits, organizers say they don't expect a seated audience again until after Broadway re-opens this summer. Like most organizations, the Chenango River Theatre was forced to close back in March as the coronavirus pandemic took hold.

"We are closely monitoring national development with COVID, any potential vaccine, and audience surveys about when people will feel comfortable returning to intimate theatres like ours," Chenango River Theatre Managing Director Bill Lebach said in a statement put out by the organization earlier this year. "We're still planning on producing our 2021 season, knowing that there



Chenango River Theatre's new Artistic Director Zach Curtis.

are a lot of variables out of our control this far out."

The Chenango River Theatre is joining ranks with others in the theatre industry to call upon Congress to offer financial relief, arguing that the national impact of shutting down theatres is "as broad as shutting down other major industries."

But for the time being, the Chenango River Theatre is relying heavily on supporter donations while most of its staff is out of work.

The CRT also hired new leadership in 2020.

Following a nine month search for a replacement the board of

directors announced in November they had hired Zach Curtis to be the new producing artistic director. For the 2021 season Curtis will work with Lebach as he makes the transition.

"We're committed to being here for this area, no matter what it takes," said Lebach.

Luckily not every business in Greene has seen the same level of impact. On Chenango Street, the coffeehouse On Common Grounds has certainly

been hit hard; yet business owner Jill Doll says being the only coffee shop in town, complete with a drive thru that

shielded her from a total shut-down last March, is helping her business stay afloat.

"Business hasn't been the greatest," Doll said, citing a small uptick in sales during the summer months before falling again in November as the number of COVID cases climbed. "Initially, things weren't too bad. But then, as people became more concerned about the coronavirus and not really knowing how it spreads, things really slowed down."

Although having a drive thru available has been a saving grace for Doll's business, she has also turned for assistance from a small business development center to help make loan payments. As sales slumped, that financial help became a lifeline, she said.

Even so, Doll says her small family-run business is in jeopardy if things don't pick up soon. As a believer in the science behind COVID-19, her best option, she explained, is to wait and hope.

"We'll just have to do our best and hang on until things get better," she said.

While it's true that sales at most Greene businesses took a hit over

the last year, one of the village's most notable landmarks - the historic Sherwood Hotel - saw a bright spot, taking on a new beginning under new ownership.

After closing its doors in 2017, the fate of the 200-year-old Sherwood seemed uncertain. But in 2020, uncertainty faded as new owner Mike LaCroce stepped in to revive The Sherwood's role as a cornerstone in the Greene community. LaCroce said he's excited to breathe new life into the 20-bedroom hotel and to get its restaurant and bar area up and running again.

LaCroce (who's also the co-owner of the Wild Owl Cafe in Norwich) has a solid reputation in the restaurant business. To help with the undertaking of The Sherwood, he was awarded a \$100,000 loan in 2020 from the Development Chenango Corporation, the economic development arm of Commerce Chenango. The loan was to help with minor renovations to the building and get the business on its feet.

"We are very excited about this opportunity that was only feasible with help of the Development Chenango loan pro-

gram through Commerce Chenango," said LaCroce.

Commerce Chenango President and CEO Kerri Green said re-opening The Sherwood has filled a void in the Greene community, and LaCroce's background in restaurant management is a boon for its potential success in fine dining, reception, and hospitality.

"There's definitely a need in our county for a couple of things. One is hotels," Green said after awarding the loan to The Sherwood last summer. "We don't have a robust number of places for people to stay when they're traveling. Greene didn't have much. B and Bs are wonderful; but when you have bigger events or more people come in, there really wasn't a larger venue for people to accommodate that."

Regardless of the damage done to downtown in 2020, business owners seem to agree on one thing: there's a lot of optimism for 2021.

"I'm hopeful that there's going to be a huge resurgence for businesses when COVID is more under control," said Doll. "I think people may have this year-long cabin fever and that they'll want to get out. We hope."



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