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FINDING SUCCESS DURING A PANDEMIC

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One year ago, the news broke that COVID-19 had reached American soil at a long-term care facility in Kirkland, Washington a few miles from Parker, Smith & Feek’s Bellevue headquarters. It wasn’t long before the virus impacted our headquarters and the rest of our offices in Washington, Alaska, Oregon, and Hawaii.

“Our clients were directly involved – they were treating the earliest known COVID-19 patients at their facilities,” [Cliff Rudolph](#), Bellevue commercial manager, recalled. “So, we started talking about how this was going to impact our employees and clients earlier than most.”

Our clients have a diverse array of operations, and the pandemic prompted a flurry of questions and needs across business lines and industries including cleaning procedures, workers’ compensation issues, paid leave requirements, business interruption claims, and other topics.

After a year of economic turmoil, a public health crisis, and a quickly hardening insurance market, Parker, Smith & Feek leadership is sharing how a commitment to employee fulfillment let it continue servicing clients.

An Early Focus On Employee Wellbeing

When the shutdown orders came down last March, many professional services companies were scrambling to figure out how to serve clients in a remote environment. Workers didn’t have access to their in-office resources, such as dual screens, printers, or reliable high-speed internet connections. Childcare and homeschooling became huge problems, as working parents suddenly had to juggle being teachers in addition to their job responsibilities. It was stressful at best and chaotic for many.

ABOUT PARKER, SMITH & FEEK

Parker, Smith & Feek is a private brokerage firm driven by client service. We offer a range of services, including commercial insurance, risk management, surety, employee benefits, and personal insurance. PS&F is ranked nationally as one of the 40 largest privately held risk management and insurance brokers. We are committed to serving the community and proud to be one of the top corporate philanthropists in the region.

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While Parker, Smith & Feek also faced a challenging months-long transition, our company was already shifting towards more flexible, remote work environments. In fact, we were in the midst of transitioning our conferencing software to Zoom when the first shutdown happened. Thanks in part to the massive 2019 snowstorm that brought the Pacific Northwest to a standstill for weeks, our IT department enabled our service teams to work remotely within a matter of hours.

“We were working on improving our employees’ work-life balance long before the pandemic hit,” Rudolph explained. “We were exploring a lot of options and already had remote work agreements in place with most of our commercial department. It’s partly why we opened a Tacoma office in 2019 – so our employees could work closer to where they live. We wanted everyone to have a variety of choices to increase their job satisfaction.”

Onboarding new employees without any face-to-face interaction was a significant obstacle initially, but with staff working remotely and geography no longer being a barrier to employment with our company, we began to recruit professionals from across the country and allow existing employees to move away from their physical offices without any disruption to client service.

“At those very early stages, when we were able to show empathy and concern for the wellbeing of our candidates, it reassured them that this was an organization that would continue to be concerned for their welfare as an employee,” said [Jennifer Stankovich](#), human resources director at Parker, Smith & Feek.

Coming Together to Support Fellow Employees

As the shutdown continued, President and CEO [David Eckroth](#) began to host regular virtual company-wide town halls to address the overabundance of uncertainty his employees were facing. He did not mince words; he explained that we were expecting to lose revenue. But he assured the company that, as with the 2008 recession,

Parker, Smith & Feek would not be conducting furloughs or layoffs. We had capital reserved to weather the pandemic and protect our most important resource – our employees and their families.

His transparency and reassurance abated many of our employees’ fears about job security, and they began to reach out and check in on each other. Teams scheduled regular virtual happy hours, set up trivia games, and dedicated time during the workday to discuss mental health and wellbeing.

By focusing so many resources into improving our employees’ wellbeing and work-life integration before an emergency like COVID-19 struck, Parker, Smith & Feek was able to spend less time worrying about our balance sheets and direct our energy to more important endeavors, like taking care of our coworkers and clients.

Pivoting to Support Clients

Parker, Smith & Feek clients represent industry groups in various jurisdictions affected differently by COVID-19 in vastly different capacities. Our biggest hurdle last March was how to communicate the enormous amount of crucial pandemic-related information to them.

“There was an overabundance of information in those early days from the government, the news, social media, everywhere,” said [Melissa Willhite](#), marketing and communications director. “We had to walk the line between sending our clients relevant and timely updates and not inundating them with emails every day. We also had to decide what information we should be communicating – if it was something that they’d heard on the news four times already, did they really need another notice about it?”

A committee was formed to set a schedule (weekly emails on Fridays) and compile, organize, and summarize the information. A specific COVID-19 resources page was posted on the website, and a team started converting in-

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person events into Zoom webinars. Because of the shorter lead time needed to organize and the myriad issues our clients were facing in the pandemic, these webinars became more frequent and better attended. Soon, we were presenting to audiences of several hundred on management liability, mental health, workforce vaccinations, and other pressing topics.

When it came to day-to-day servicing, the insurance industry's reliance on paper forms and certificates also proved a problem. Luckily, our teams had already invested in tools such as paperless invoicing and statements, electronic applications, data-sharing portals, and DocuSign, which allowed us to continue to serve our clients' insurance needs remotely without interruption.

But Parker, Smith & Feek went above and beyond helping clients with their insurance to support them. We encouraged our employees to support clients' businesses financially and otherwise. Our Alaska office organized socially distanced tailgate parties at restaurant clients' parking lots. Even before the pandemic, we set up a charitable giving program for employees to send company money to causes of their choosing and provided paid time off for volunteering in the community; both sorely needed once COVID-19 hit.

Organic Growth in a Difficult Year

As it turns out, Eckroth's predictions in the early townhalls were mostly incorrect. Parker, Smith & Feek did not merely endure the last twelve months of an unprecedented pandemic – we prospered through it. Our firm grew operationally, geographically, and technologically, all without any mergers or acquisitions.

Parker, Smith & Feek's focus on our employees as our most important asset and investing in resources that empower them to serve our clients at the best of their abilities meant that we were ready to act when the chips were down. Our private ownership structure facilitates holding these values; without outside shareholders to appease, we are able to focus on long-term goals, not short-term gains.

Eckroth reflected on the benefit of maintaining these principles, "Early on in the pandemic, we realized all of the time and effort we invested towards an elevated client experience, resiliency, and disaster recovery would quickly pay dividends in our ability to effectively execute and efficiently engage with our clients, internal teams, and trading partners."