



### **New Business, New Ideas**

Lucas Jenson has been in business for six years. Five is a critical milestone for a new business to reach. It's been said that if you make it through the first five years, you're golden. That was before Covid.

In the first few months, during shutdown, sales were dismal. However, Lucas has found that Covid brought some unexpected opportunities in the ensuing months. Vermont is experiencing a boom in housing sales, renovations, and construction. This seems to be driven by Vermont's enviable position of being the safest state in the nation.

For The Tree House, this real estate boom has led to a business boom. What's hard to know yet is whether this will last. Is The Tree House experiencing natural growth at a five-year mark or is this a temporary Covid response? For Lucas, this unknown requires a watchful eye. He is focused on improving efficiency, increasing capacity, maximizing his space for the greatest productivity, and managing customer relationships. He can actually be more selective in the work he accepts.

A boom in business, however, is not without its challenges. There is a higher level of stress in the current environment, and more pressure on employees to get work done. An increased pressure to accomplish more comes with a caveat to keep safety in mind. Lucas understands the difficulties of the current environment and works to make sure his employees feel valued by offering raises and bonuses. Even pre-Covid, the industry had workforce shortages so it behooves any business to keep good employees on the job. Workforce training, development, and apprenticeship programs, especially with VT Woodworking School, would be a benefit to businesses. "This is such gratifying work," says Lucas. Wood products focus on life improvements and bring a sense of well-being into people's homes."

Covid has highlighted the resiliency of Vermont. Lucas finds Vermont to be a great place because of safety and community support of local business, not only from Vermont's citizens but from state agencies and federal government. Early programs such as PPP helped to support employees through the shutdown, giving businesses a level of financial security in very shaky times. State grant programs that distributed Covid Relief Funds (CRF) further allowed

businesses to weather the challenges. “Vermont is so fortunate to have both support and access to people at all levels of government, from Agency Commissioners to Congressional staffers,” says Lucas.

Support within the industry is also a plus, from the Council and the Northern Forest Center. Lucas has been participating in the NFC Board Forum, which provides helpful access to other business leaders dealing with similar situations, from finances to safety. In fact, this Forum is what led to the idea of a Council Cohort, providing a platform for Council members to share their knowledge and experience with others. Says Lucas, “You are not alone. We are all dealing with Covid but there are other business issues that will arise. We all want to see our industry succeed.” Lucas had to learn a lot on his own as a new business. Now he looks to other businesses that have been where he is as a way to see where he may be going. The larger businesses are a peek into the potential that may exist for The Tree House.

While The Tree House has a website, they do not have any online sales capacity and are inactive on both Instagram and Facebook. There is enough business now that it’s not a priority to develop these assets. Lucas has seen however, how these sales tools have benefitted other businesses but also worries about the impact to small business retailers in Vermont.

The recent acquisition of Vermont Butcherblock brand and website may eventually benefit from increased online sales capacity but for now, it’s not promoted or pushed. Lucas has just quietly been incorporating the Vermont Butcherblock brand into his existing work flow. The Tree House has not seen any supply chain issues yet either. While there were some slowdowns in the early days of Covid, materials have been steadily available. Prices have been very consistent as well. Lucas relies on relationships with local suppliers and currently sources almost all of his maple from Council member, Ken Gagnon at Gagnon Lumber.

The Tree House is transparent, open for visits by other business owners. In fact, Lucas suggests that the Council support a “Lunch Bunch” (or better name if you can suggest it) that offers a stipend of \$25 to member companies who spend an hour over lunch or beers to chat about business with others. Informal networking is a great way to get to know each other, make friends and possible business connections. His invitation is open to anyone who finds themselves in the Burlington area.

When queried about the time he spends being an active participant, Lucas is quick to say that getting involved is really beneficial. “Time given to participate provides real value. There’s always something to learn.” Getting involved with the Council and other programs connects you to the flow of information. “You get what you put in.” he adds.