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Virus 2020 - Companies rise to challenge - by Stanley Hurwitz

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When a business and brand are associated with worthy causes, it makes a powerfully positive impression. It helps Coca Cola's brand when they sponsor sports teams and the Olympics. It's good PR when Amgen's cardio drugs support the American Heart Association.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought focus to one of our country's biggest areas of poor planning: How did we allow a foreign country to control our supply of life-saving pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, and to threaten withholding those or slowing down its delivery, possibly increasing the number of sick and dead?

Meanwhile, it's been impressive that so many companies rose to the occasion when the U. S. found itself lacking in life-saving items. Without awaiting pressure of the federal Defense Production Act (DPA), hero companies retooled factories from making things like underwear to producing face-masks, gowns, gloves and ventilators. Among these are Hanes, Jockey, New Balance and L. L. Bean.

After the 1941 surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, as the U. S. was drawn into WWII, the government contracted with manufacturers to quickly produce military needs: Oldsmobile switched to munitions; Studebaker made trucks and built engines for B-17 bombers; Lockheed Martin built 19,000 fighters and bombers during the war; U.S. Steel devised faster ways to produce steel. Singer Sewing Machine retooled to produce pistols, machine guns, and precision aviation components.

In a masterful PR ploy, the American Tobacco Company (Lucky Strike) won approval to include free cigarettes in soldiers' rations. Ads encouraged citizens back home to support the troops by sending cigarettes. Big tobacco knew how addictive nicotine is and, acting generous, roped in millions of 'dedicated' smokers.

Similarly, in a different kind of war – the COVID-19 pandemic – U.S. companies rallied including many Massachusetts brands. For the first time since WWII, Gillette (now part of Procter & Gamble) switched some production from razors to face shields. In the 1940s, they made aircraft parts. Now, they're making and donating 100,000 face shields. Among other Mass. businesses joining the fight: 3D printer Formlabs (diagnostic swabs), card maker Lovepop (shields and gowns), apparel maker Merrow (gowns), athletic shoe maker New Balance (masks), and 99Degrees rehired 150 workers to produce one million protective gowns.

A month after Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt told Congress, "Powerful enemies must be out-fought and out-produced." Today, Americans are out-fighting a dangerous virus.

Business owners can always boost their image by supporting "good cause" organizations and movements. Think of local charities or schools and how you could provide support that would tie in with your brand or products. It's a great way to build buzz about your brand. And if you're too busy running your business, talk to a proven pro (me!) because "Great PR doesn't happen by itself."

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