



*The Party & Events Fiji team, before COVID-19 (Party & Events Fiji)*

# COVID-19: a Fijian businesswoman's perspective

**By Kim Beddoes**

I am the owner of Party & Events Fiji and Fiji Weddings. We specialise in creating stunning celebrations throughout the beautiful Fiji Islands. Over the past 10 years, we have grown into Fiji's leading events and wedding company, specialising in all aspects of event styling and management. We have proudly

styled and managed some of the biggest and most prestigious events in the country.

By mid-February 2020 the international news coverage of COVID-19 and the corresponding complete stop of deposits by our international clients was significant enough for me to activate our company's 'worst-case scenario' survival plan. The plan was explained individually to each staff member in the context of their personal situation, and I also suggested a Plan A, B and C for their own family's survival. I regret not recording this meeting; it was surreal.

On the afternoon of 19 March 2020 the first COVID-19 case in Fiji was announced, and we closed that same day. With the lockdown and ban on gatherings of any sort, my business would remain closed, with no income, for 10 weeks.

On 1 June 2020 I reopened the business, on my own, just as I had done 10 years earlier when I started my business full time. It was a welcome distraction from the doom-and-gloom news about the pandemic.

Closing the business to weather a storm, reassessing, restarting and reopening is something which we, the people of Fiji, are very familiar with. Tropical cyclones are a regular interruption to island life and business. The frequency and experience of these natural disasters have, I sometimes think, made us more resilient and better prepared, to an extent, to handle the current pandemic.

Of all the changes I have made within my business to recover faster after each disaster, the most useful has been facilitating my administration staff to be able to work from home. This has allowed us to reopen without the large overheads of working from an office.

The past 12 months have been a struggle. Like most SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises), we are surviving week by week - doing what we can to survive,

to pay staff wages so that they can feed their families, and to pay utility and other bills to keep our business alive.

With over 70% of business lost due to the pandemic, I have only been able to rehire 50% of my team at reduced hours and pay. I miss my pre-COVID team - I miss the banter, I miss the laughter, and I even miss the 'headache' they would often give me. My team were my extended family and to let them down by not being able to keep them employed consistently over the past 12 months has been the single most devastating aspect of this pandemic for me.

My only solace is knowing that my team are having more time with their young families. As a mother myself, I am grateful for the precious additional time I have been able to spend with my young son as a result of the pandemic.

The majority of SMEs that I work with, particularly those that make up the support services to the tourism industry, are barely operational. Those that have been able to work in the local market are earning a small fraction of their pre-COVID-19 income. But while the income has come to a grinding halt, the bills have not. Ironically, assets purchased on bank loans to grow businesses pre-COVID-19 now threaten to close the businesses, as banks continue to expect their repayments.

As we find ourselves in the midst of a second extended lockdown, SMEs are all dealing with their respective realities. Some have already closed their doors permanently; others, where possible, have adjusted their products and services to target the local market; others have put their businesses into a state of hibernation with owners returning to family property to plant, harvest and survive off the land and sea.

We don't know how long this situation will last, but there is no end in sight at the moment. I think to get through the coming months we need to create a truly inclusive task force made up of the best and brightest individuals Fiji has, both

here at home as well as the diaspora of Fijians living all over the world. We (government, private sector and NGOs) need to work together and come up with solutions to feed and protect the health of our people. Equally important, we need to keep our businesses open. We have the capacity to do this; we need political will at the highest levels. And we need the support and guidance of our near neighbours, for example New Zealand, who have been recognised worldwide for their excellent handling of this crisis.

This pandemic has been devastating for my business, yet I am grateful for the time it has given me to work on projects and improvements that have been in the pipeline for years that I simply never had the time to do. I look back at what we achieved, and it reminds me that with very little we were able to achieve so much. I have done it before, I can do it again, but next time around I am not starting from zero. I am restarting with a strong company reputation, a decade of experience and the knowledge and wisdom that has been learnt in the past 12 months of this pandemic.

I am keeping a positive state of mind and visualising my business surviving and one day thriving again.

## **About the author/s**

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Kim Beddoes is a weddings and events specialist based in Nadi, Fiji. She was the youngest woman to be awarded Fiji's Businesswoman of the Year, in 2018.