

# CAN A PANDEMIC PIVOT OUTLAST THE PANDEMIC?

Many entrepreneurs reinvented themselves this past year—and the franchise **SAFE FROM SPREAD** is a perfect example of how a pivot can pay off. It moved fast, served a new need, and profited greatly. But with the pandemic's end now in sight, brands like these are preparing for their biggest battle yet: survival in a post-pandemic world.

by **CLINT CARTER**







→ **CLEANING UP**  
Combe moved fast  
and won big  
during COVID-19.

**R**yan Combe sat at his desk, staring through the window at a gloomy winter in Ogden, Utah. The year had started with such promise. After investing some \$60,000 in business acquisition, his consulting company, Better Way Franchise Group, hit a hot streak with a slate of new clients and proposal requests. It was tracking toward its best year ever, a million dollars in revenue. Then the bottom fell out.

COVID-19 dashed hopes of profit for millions of entrepreneurs, and the consulting

industry was hit particularly hard. Combe had to divert rent money to make payroll for his staff of three. He filed for an Economic Injury Disaster Loan and applied for government relief through the Paycheck Protection Program. But the money didn't show up as quickly as promised. With his next payday approaching, he had just \$340 in his account.

"It got really dark for a minute," says Combe. He thought about his wife and kids. He thought about his employees and their families. Then he thought about Ulysses S. Grant.

From the corner of Combe's desk, the 18th president—

or rather, a bobblehead likeness—stared up at him. He'd purchased the souvenir at Grant's Tomb in New York as a reminder that *down* and *out* are two different afflictions. Before his face was on the \$50 bill, Grant failed as a farmer and debt collector. When the Civil War began, he was laboring at the family leather shop. He was down, but he damn sure wasn't out. "The guy went from working for his little brother for an hourly wage to being president of the United States," says Combe. "It may be the most meteoric rise in the history of the United States."

Combe draws inspiration from heroic stories like this. He uses them to inspire his staff and clients, and he shares them from stages at franchise conferences. Suddenly, thinking about Grant, he realized that he was sitting on a golden opportunity. "Next thing I know, I'm up at 3 in the morning reading the *New England Journal of Medicine*," he says.

What followed was Combe's own meteoric rise. He bought a paint gun, loaded it with hydrogen peroxide, and began spraying down local businesses. A month after his consulting work dried up, Combe built a website for his new company, Safe From Spread, and initiated a \$10 daily ad campaign on Facebook. Within 24 hours, he'd booked \$3,800 worth of work.

He'd done more than make payroll. He'd launched a viable business that disinfects restaurants, gyms, accounting firms, and country clubs. By the time his PPP loan came through, Combe had enlisted a cofounder, launched a franchise, and sold a dozen areas. By the end of 2020, he'd signed 18 franchisees to cover

74 territories, including those in Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Dallas, and Chicago.

Safe From Spread's rapid ascent is rare in the typically slow-moving world of franchising, but after years in the industry, Combe knew how to move fast. And from a strategic standpoint, he wanted to gain as much ground as possible while demand was at its peak. But with the COVID-19 vaccine now in distribution, his new company is on the precipice of an entirely new challenge.

Can it pivot fast enough—and in the right direction—to keep growing?

**LOOKING BACK,** Combe's career has been defined by moving fast and moving on. When he was 25, he opened a frozen yogurt shop called Spoon Me. The brand sold T-shirts and underwear with sayings like "Shut up and spoon me" printed on them, and the napkins read like mad libs: "Hey baby, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I really dig your \_\_\_\_\_. Want to spoon?"

Spoon Me sold 86 franchise territories in less than two years, but it failed to build the underlying infrastructure to support the business. "I couldn't figure out how you could grow too fast while still making money," says Combe. He stepped down as CEO in 2009 and eventually sold Spoon Me to a private equity group.

In 2012, he decided to run for Congress as a Democrat in a red state. A cheeky campaign video went viral and drew vitriol from such media outlets as Fox News and Breitbart. #RyanCombeisanidiot trended on social media, and Combe began receiving threats. "I can deal with it," he says. "But the



effect that it has on your family?" He still chokes up talking about it.

Combe lost in the primary and returned to his career in franchising with a thicker skin. After a few corporate gigs with home repair brands, he didn't feel creatively satisfied by the industry—but that, he realized, was his biggest opportunity.

"Franchising is one of the most antiquated, insider games there is," he says. "If I went to the majority of franchises and asked, 'Why do you do things this way?' 99 out of 100 would reply, 'Because that's the way we do it.'" In 2017, Combe launched his own agency to do things differently. By 2019, Better Way Franchise Group surpassed \$500,000 in sales, and it kicked off 2020 with three big new contracts. It should have been its best year yet.

Instead, he found himself building Safe From Spread just to survive. One of Combe's first calls was to Kevin Lundell, an old high school friend who runs both a chiropractic office and a gym at a strip mall in nearby Roy. "I was impressed with how quickly he was able to move on it," says Lundell. He hired Safe From Spread to service both businesses.

Combe wanted to rule out the possibility that he was simply receiving hometown treatment, so he called Ryan Hicks, a friend and a franchise technology supplier based in Dallas. Weeks earlier, Hicks had been laid up for 10 days with COVID-19. He was just coming out of quarantine when Combe called.

"Thirty-six seconds into the call, I said, 'I'm in,'" Hicks recalls. He opened Safe From

Spread's second location, and it took off as quickly as the original. The two Ryans formed a cofounding partnership, and with the pandemic in full swing, they decided to move fast, but with intention. (Combe had learned his lesson from Spoon Me's failure.) Rather than have an attorney draw up a franchise disclosure document (FDD), a 100-plus page legal filing that can take weeks to create, Combe "did some find and replace" on an existing FDD. After a day and a half of work, he sent it to his attorney for review, and on May 8, Safe From Spread was formally franchising.

Typically, new franchisors are cautioned to expect slow sales up front—maybe one or two the first year. "Franchisees like you to have three years

that will kill a virus or bacteria: alcohol, bleach, or hydrogen peroxide," says Combe. "So you can church it up however you like, but nobody has a proprietary product."

In 2020, dozens of cleaning and remediation services, including Servpro, Belfor, and Jani-King, rolled out disinfecting services. But Combe is convinced that, long-term, he'll beat them all on branding. Safe From Spread's logo—a crossed-out germ—leaves no room for ambiguity, and he says the company name delivers a clear message: "It's a lot easier to say, 'This business is safe from spread' than to say, 'Oh, this mold and water remediation company came and sanitized everything.'"

The way he sees it, disinfectant is a product. The unique

On the phone with NBC's safety director, Combe pitched hard: "If you give me 24 hours notice, I will be anywhere for you. If you need me in Dubai on Saturday, I'll get there."

The guy laughed, but shortly after, Combe received a request for a NASCAR event that would take place at the Charlotte Motor Speedway two days later. Combe flew in, gathered supplies, and used Indeed.com to hire help. He trained his new employee on-site, finished the job, then flew back home to Ogden. The next day, Combe woke up to an email with NBC's full August schedule—26 events for the month. That kicked off a year-long contract that supplied guaranteed work with the NFL playoffs, the Kentucky Derby, and the Masters. It has also



THE [BIGGEST] CHALLENGE FOR US IS JUST FIGURING OUT THE RIGHT TRAJECTORY," SAYS COFOUNDER RYAN HICKS. "WE WANT EVERYBODY TO BE SUCCESSFUL BEFORE WE'RE BLOWING OUT HUNDREDS OF UNITS."

of financial statements," says Kathleen Gosser, Ph.D., director of franchise management at the University of Louisville. "And obviously, that's not available with a new brand." But Safe From Spread had the advantage of solving for a novel problem of epic scale. Within one day of filing the FDD, the company received a call from a potential franchisee in Phoenix. Five days later, he purchased six territories.

What's shocking isn't simply that Safe From Spread didn't have a proven financial record. It's that the underlying product isn't particularly novel. "There are only three things

service is peace of mind. "We tackle the psychological side of it," he says. To that end, Safe From Spread leans into the theater of disinfecting. With new jobs, it mounts GoPros on its spray guns. Afterward, it hands the client a sped-up 30-second video of the property being misted. Companies can post the videos to their websites and social channels to show customers they're being safe.

The company's aggressive strategy paid off big in June, when a job at a country club in Utah led to a conversation with NBCUniversal, which was on-site to film a golf tournament for its Golf Channel.

served as a powerful recruitment tool.

Take Bill Graefe, a partner at Fisher Zucker, the law firm that represents Safe From Spread. He decided to start franchising with the company in Philadelphia, and before he'd even paid his fees, Combe set him up with his first sub-contract job: the Women's PGA Championship, a week-long event of hourly rounds spraying bathrooms, door handles, and golf carts.

As a franchise lawyer, Graefe has been looking at FDDs for 14 years, but this was the first time he ever felt inspired to sign on himself. ▶



"It's rare that you see that kind of Item 7," says Graefe, referring to Safe From Spread's initial fees. The company set up an unusual structure. Franchisees pay \$1,500 plus an additional fee based on the population of their territory: It's a nickel for every person who lives there. That way, an area with a population of 200,000 (\$11,500) costs about a third of one with 600,000 (\$31,500). "I thought this was a franchise I could manage without destroying my bandwidth," Graefe says.

As for the management obligations, the franchise rulebook is as thin as they come. The company makes no stipulation on vehicles or staffing, and franchisees are free to run the operation from their garages. The business

was designed to go from deal to dollar overnight. But ultimately, Graefe says, Combe's confidence was the draw. "I really don't think I would have made the jump if it weren't for him," says Graefe. "I just believe in him."

That's a powerful endorsement for a founder who was recently down to his last \$340. But just how far can that kind of personal trust go? It's a question Combe will be increasingly wrestling with in 2021, as he faces an existential crisis for his new business: In a post-pandemic era, does anyone *really* want to hire a third-party disinfecting service?

Lundell, the early Safe From Spread customer who owns a chiropractic office and gym, may be a harbinger of tough times to come. He

used Combe's service just a few times before deciding that masks and social distancing made a bigger impact for less money. And in the fall, when the pandemic surged in Ogden, two of Lundell's trainers tested positive for COVID-19. But rather than call Safe From Spread, he loaded a paint gun with disinfectant and sprayed down the gym himself. "We kind of stole his idea, to be honest," says Lundell.

**COMPARED WITH** businesses that grow slowly over time, those that crop up quickly in response to a new trend are inherently less stable, says Chris Conner, founder of the Atlanta-based consulting agency Franchise Marketing Systems. Remember eBay

drop-off stores? "They came on the scene with something like eight brands and sold 100 units overnight," says Conner. "Then eBay changed its algorithms or something, and they all closed."

One doesn't have to stretch the imagination far to see the disinfecting bubble bursting later this year. When it happens, survival will likely go to those with the strongest branding and infrastructure, along with diversified revenue streams. And that's where Combe is most excited. "There are a million ways to pivot this business," he says. Despite being born during COVID-19, Safe From Spread doesn't explicitly have any pandemic language or imagery in its branding. The company is currently working on a clean-



ing product it can sell in super-markets, and it just rolled out a TSA-friendly disinfectant tablet for travelers. Once through airport security, people can drop the pill into a spray bottle, fill it with water, and then spritz their seat, rental car, hotel bed—anything with germ potential.

But as Safe From Spread grows, it may struggle to move with the same kind of speed that helped it get where it is today. “As a franchisor, you can introduce new products all you want,” says Gosser. “But the more franchisees you have, the tougher it is.”

In November, Safe From Spread rolled out a new product—an antimicrobial coating that kills germs for up to 90 days. Combe rushed it for the holidays, but he

admits he could already feel his big ship growing harder to turn. He pushed information to franchisees as it became available, and he’d sometimes end product calls by telling them to expect more updates next week. “They’re like, ‘I don’t want more updates next week,’” he says. “I want to tell my employees about it today!”

The lag in transmission gave him doubts that the product would be deployed properly system-wide, and that hints at the unique dilemma Safe From Spread is currently facing: How much money and effort should the company put into growth, and how much should it put toward adapting for the future? “The [biggest] challenge for us is just figuring out the right trajectory,” says Hicks. “We want

everybody to be successful before we’re blowing out hundreds of units.”

It’s a phenomenal problem to have for a company that’s less than a year old. Safe From Spread envisions continued opportunity in subscription-based services for live events, plus movie and television sets. It’s also banking on new standards of cleanliness in traditional offices. (Even before COVID-19, routine illness cost American businesses \$530 billion annually in lost productivity, according to the Integrated Benefits Institute.)

Combe still has the Ulysses S. Grant bobblehead on his desk, but lately he’s been talking about a new hero: Vladimir Guerrero, the legendary baseball big hitter who famously refused to wear bat-

ting gloves. “The dude would take hacks,” says Combe. “He’d swing so hard that when he missed, he’d fall down and his helmet would come flying off.”

Guerrero could embarrass himself with pratfall strikeouts all he wanted. “But in the bottom of the ninth, he’d hit a shot 480 feet over center field,” says Combe. “Now nobody gives a shit about what happened in the first and third innings. Now he’s a hero.”

Combe has taken some hacks himself. “I’ve struck out and fallen on my ass a few times,” he says. “But I’ve always been able to come back. If I connect on this, it’s going to go a long, long way.” **E**

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