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Just how much has COVID changed us? - by Joe Aquino

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I believe we have 18 more months of this pandemic. The word is that the vaccine should be out soon and that it will take nine months of distribution to reach everyone. Nine months. While that's certainly music to our ears and sounds optimistic, what if they are wrong? Let's not forget, it took 40 years to find a vaccine for the Spanish flu!

Recently, I discovered that 169 hair and nail salons went out of business throughout Manhattan, parts of Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx. That is a lot of damage done to that one industry alone, by any standard. The Bronx seems to have been hit the least with the lowest amount of closure.

People's buying habits have changed tremendously too, and I can certainly attest to that, especially for the services space. Since the lady that helps us with our domestic chores is unable to travel from Brooklyn, I have picked up the slack and then some. And I have to say, I am having a lot of fun with

this!

I used to run health clubs in my 20s, so I know how to keep a clean shop. On Monday mornings at 6:30 a.m., you will find me working nine wash machines and then nine dryers. Through trial and error, I've found that doing all the clothes in cold water, and not being heavy handed with the detergent, softener and bleach for the whites is the way to go. I have become a good folder too! Oh, and did I tell you not to fully dry the dress and polo shirts and let them dry naturally instead on the hangers before you iron them? Yes, I now know how to iron too.

During the lockdown I also found myself trimming my own hair and believe me, my second career could have been a hair stylist. Another secret! Since the nail salon that I went to frequently isn't open, I now enjoy doing them on my own, which has kept me out of the populous and cha-ching!, more cash savings too.

And what about food? Most nights pre-COVID, if my wife and I were not eating out, we were ordering in. That has all stopped and now we cook on a regular basis and just go out to eat on the weekends. Now, where one dinner would have cost $160, that is now our entire fish bill for the week–and I buy the best fish! Plus, I got my cooking skills back, so I'm not complaining. In March, I received a George Foreman grill from my sister, and I am enjoying the speed and freshness in which good ol' George delivers.

All this self-sufficiency is turning out to be good for me and my wife but unfortunately, it is not good for the retailers and restaurants. We used to have two dry cleaners, one that did our very best clothes and the other for the day-to-day garments. And I have to say, we hardly use them now in our new life and routines.

Talking about which, that is the next shoe to drop, which will be unfortunate since they will not be able to make a profit at the state's mandatory 25% occupancy level. If what happened to the hair and nail salon industry is anything that can possibly happen to the food and beverage industry, we are in trouble.

We can all see what happened to the hotel industry in NYC. Half of them are closed and the other half are running at 20 to 40% occupancy. Forget about making much money at such levels. The restaurants have started a class action suit against the state to recover $2 billion in lost revenue. The sabers will soon be swinging.

We have come so far from where I was as a teen, but did we? I remember, mom cooked every night at home and the only time she didn't was when we got Chinese food delivered on a Sunday, or when we went out to the new franchise in town called Kentucky Fried Chicken and brought home The Colonels baskets of chicken. That was a special event. I remember, mom and sister did their own hair too, with lots of curlers and Adorn hairspray. Going to the hair salon was not a weekly event, and the same went for nail salons which I believe were non-existent back then.

Times change and so has technology.

Now, the leaders in the retail industry are using apps for their customers and when done right, this has been their lifesaver in this present economy. Dry Bar (hair salons) is just one example and Starbucks is another. And literally all of their competition has fallen by the wayside.

Some of the other winners in today's market is furniture sales. I recently camped out at a CB2 store, a Crate & Barrel's smaller size division, and you'd think they were handing out $50 bills at the door to everyone who walked into the store! People are spending more time at their homes and now they want a nicer environment by bringing in new pieces and accessorizing their living spaces.

Hotels near the water and others that are within 150 miles from a city center are another sector that is doing well. People are doing more weekend travel. These hotels are seemingly able to satisfy the customers about running a clean and sanitized operation. At least the large brands like Hilton and Marriott have. Now, when you are about to enter a hotel room, you must break a seal which tells you that you're the first person in since the cleaning crew left. As far as local travel goes, even the NYS governor is promoting apples and pumpkin picking this fall in Upstate New York. Oh, boy!

Movie theatres, Broadway and Hollywood have been the hardest hit too. The Feds just changed a law that has been on the books for the past 70 years now allowing studios to buy movie theatres and going back to being a vertical operation. Hopefully the studios will see that as a good idea or we may soon lose our movie houses to the new technology of streaming altogether.

I am sure we can all agree that with the advent of technology and globalization, people have been working 24/7. One of the designers, Anna Sui, was comparing the 90s with today and she said, "It just doesn't stop, people used to take off and have down time in the 90's and now that is rare. One city goes to sleep and another one wakens, the communication never stops."

Looking at today's society, it's no wonder that we got hooked on all these services in the first place. Now that the pandemic has slowed things down, one may want to enjoy their newfound time.

Times may have been simpler or better back then. Stores were closed on Sunday by law, allowing families to be together. For those old enough to remember, the saying "visiting!" meant to go and visit the relatives.

I have not heard that word in a long time, now don't forget to bring the Entenmann's cake.

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