

Stories from the COVID-19 Front Lines: Q&A with Multi-Brand Franchisee Lee Kleiner

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As part of our ongoing coverage of Covid-19 and its effects on franchising, we're asking franchisees what they're doing to get through the crisis and come out the other side.

Lee Kleiner has spent two decades in the franchise business with well-established brands including Dairy Queen, Which Wich, and now Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh. When we profiled him earlier this year, he was expecting a banner year. Now, like so many franchisees, he's having to adjust and adapt. He took time out to share how the pandemic has affected his business.

How has Covid-19 affected your business?

As the owner of multiple Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh locations, we've had to adjust how we do business. The first step was to look at where we were spending our time and effort. After evaluating where things stood, we realized that we needed to restructure where and how we were investing our time. A lot of it has been on the fly, but we've adapted to the changes as needed. The nature of the business has changed from in-person dining to only delivery and curbside pickup.

What are you doing right now to get through this?

Our first step was adapting our restaurants to new systems and processes to protect our customers and employees. We implemented new safety measures for handling cash, cleaning practices, and how we interact with our customers. Once we ensured that we had the right safety measures in place, we began working on securing PPP funding to help our employees get back to work. Then we looked at how we were using our marketing efforts and made adjustments to focus on online ordering. Before Covid-19, third-party delivery was often considered to be excess baggage, something you could get by with or without. Now, it has quickly become the thing that is keeping people's heads above water. As we were analyzing how we do business, our priority was our customers and staff. We have been in constant contact with our staff to keep them up to date on all that we are doing.

Is your franchisor helping keep you afloat?

The Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh team has done a great job of providing information, sharing where to go and how to get support. This has been a huge help, and our local team has worked to use all of the assets where we can. Whether it's lending an ear to our stresses and concerns or just checking in every other week, the franchisor is truly showing that they care for us – it's an all-in mentality.

What are you doing to help your employees through this?

Following the leadership of our franchisor on the macro level, we've followed their strategy at our locations as well. We understand employees' concerns, and we are keeping them up to date on everything we are doing to get them back to work as soon as possible. We're working to connect with them and share resources to best help them.

What are you doing for your customers?

If there's a silver lining to the whole Covid-19 process, it's been our increased communication with customers. With Garbanzo Mediterranean Fresh, we use Paytronix to run our app. We've been playing around with the different promos we are offering, for example. Every day we are sharing information on budget-type offers to help the community as well as sharing other avenues to help. Normally, we aren't this communicative with our customers, but with the

response we've seen, we will likely continue this post-Covid-19 as well. It's been a real eye-opening experience to take 2 minutes to create a promotion and then 10 minutes later see all the orders coming in! While there are always corporate blackout dates for promotions, we will likely be experimenting more and more with creating promotions.

How are you working with your suppliers?

With Garbanzo doing the right things on the back end, our lives are easier on the front end. The franchisor managing these relationships is a huge weight off our backs. But we've been honest with all of our suppliers. While I've heard horror stories about others in the business, we've been as transparent as possible and our suppliers have given us some wiggle room. Everyone has been flexible and willing to work with us.

What are you doing about cash flow?

When reviewing the relief program options, applying for PPP made the most sense. We are all working together, and our goal is to get that money to keep our employees employed. We've been fortunate that we haven't completely closed down as a result of Covid-19. While our dining rooms are closed until further notice, our delivery, carryout, online pick-up, and curbside assistance options are keeping us open during our normal hours of operation. With the PPP, we will have more flexibility and hopefully, our biggest problem will be how to keep our restaurant employees busy. Certain aspects of their jobs have become slightly obsolete – you can't go into office buildings to hand out flyers, as there's no one in offices right now. But we would find ways to give them work, even if it's making cold calls to potential customers.

What else would you like to see from your franchisor or government?

Our franchisor has been great about regular check-ins to show that people matter. I hope that going forward, Garbanzo continues to push the envelope and try different ways of doing business. Things will be different after Covid-19. But there are other ways to handle it, and I'm excited to see how Garbanzo continues to experiment and innovate outside of the norm. As I've been innovating with the promotions on a local level, I'd love to see the brand continue to be on the cutting edge.

How are you planning to reopen and rebuild your business post-Covid-19?

We will be following the recommendations of our local government officials. Everyone is playing by the government's rules, and we are ready to play the long game. Our guiding principle in all of this is truly the health and safety of our team, customers, and community. Ideally, our Garbanzo business will rebuild the way we originally built it: executing great food and treating people right. We might lose some of our catering business, as people aren't sitting around offices eating lunch. However, things will return to normal and we just need to weather this storm.

Link to the article: <https://bit.ly/2ztOKaK>.