

LOCK DOWN LAUNCH

August 2020

We have all been challenged by the pandemic this year in so many different ways. Every one of us has a different story of how it has affected us and our family, our friends, our work, our health, our plans for the future and more. It has taken its toll in so many ways and will leave its mark for many years to come on each and every one of us.

Quite early on in the lockdown, I found myself having to make a major decision as a result of changes brought about by the pandemic about how I was going to continue with my work life.

I have been a qualitative researcher for over 25 years now, starting my career at the bigger agencies and then, for the last 14 years running my own business. However, with lockdown in full force, my business partner understandably decided she needed job security and, with the uncertainty we were facing within our very much face-to-face business, she wanted to accept a full time role. It made sense – but it meant I suddenly had to consider my options.

I wasn't completely surprised by her decision as there is indeed, a lot of uncertainty for us quallies as well as small businesses but, at the same time, I would be lying if I didn't say that I was somewhat surprised. After making joint decisions for 14 years and always feeling that we were largely in agreement about all the stuff that mattered, I had not seen this coming.

I spent a few weeks reeling from the sudden and enforced change that I needed to adjust to. Having time to reflect on how I felt about that change was made even more complicated by having two teenage children off school that needed support with lessons, working in an industry that was trying to find ways to carry on doing research without being allowed to be with others, clients being furloughed or made redundant, research budgets being cut, not being able to see friends and family for the valued support in the usual ways and, having to fathom out how to get things done without going out!

Then I realised. I needed to think about what the new opportunities were for me in the midst of all this change, not just what the drawbacks were. I'm not someone that likes to just sit still. I like to be busy. I like to feel a sense of achievement and accomplishment. I like to feel in control and see that I am making progress.

So, maybe this was the change I needed to start to do things a little differently? Maybe. I didn't know for sure but what I did know was that sitting around wondering about it for too long wasn't going to help me find out. I had to start thinking about the opportunities this change brought to me and I had to do that quickly.

So, here's what I did. Five top things that helped me navigate through some challenging times and also, hopefully prepare me for more happy times in the world of research.

It may help others in the midst of a similar dilemma about how to transition a business or career during a period of such change. And it might not. But, here it is anyway. Hopefully it will make an interesting read if nothing more.

- **Networking.** I started connecting with as many people as I could, partly to put the feelers out for work but mainly to help me feel grounded and also, to help me see that there was a research world out there full of people who were also trying to find their own way through the pandemic. I owe a lot to the wonderful Tom Kerr, a friend from the day I started in the research world, who literally held my hand virtually through some difficult days. He helped me formulate a plan and line me up some insightful conversations with some great researchers. I joined various industry drop-ins (The ICG and AQR) which proved to be a wonderful way to connect with fellow researchers, many of whom I had never met before but welcomed me and always gave me something to think about after our chats. I also picked up the phone as much as possible and, connected with interesting people and groups on LinkedIn. This has hopefully led me towards new connections that may result in work but at that time, they helped me to feel connected with others and, a part of something bigger which was so important.
- **Training.** I joined a lot of webinars to learn new skills. I undertook some training in on-line qualitative research methods and learned a lot via demos from the plethora of on-line platforms that are out there. I joined courses run locally by my London Borough on how to run a business, improving your Linked In profile, public speaking, building resilience, using social media for business, developing a business plan, creating a working life that fits with your values and more. I read books and articles and kept abreast of some interesting reads in the media.
- **Building a brand.** I connected with a fantastic graphic designer (Christian at Creative Cadence) who worked with me to develop a new logo and create stationery and templates with a new colour palette. My husband, a professional photographer, took photos that really helped deliver against my creative brief of needing something professional but informal. I worked with my web designer to create a new website. He had worked hard to help me launch a website for the charity I chair last year and so it was great to work with him again on my own personal project. It felt good to create my own identity and give me something positive to talk to clients and colleagues about.
- **Planning.** Out with the old and in with the new was my motto. I found a new accountant thanks to a recommendation from a client, learned some new accounting software that has made my life ten times easier to keep my books straight and discovered a new incentive payment system that means for the first time in nearly 30 years, I no longer need to stuff little brown envelopes with cash for my fieldwork!
- **Well-being.** I knew how important it was to look after myself. Eating healthy foods has always been important to me but now more than ever. Living close to Wimbledon Common, it was easy to get out for regular walks. PE with Joe, I hate to say it, was a lifeline for weeks! Cycle rides both locally and also even into central London a couple of times (once for a day of fieldwork!) brought a sense of freedom. The best thing though, was being able to join my sister's regular on-line yoga classes that I could now beam in from San Francisco!