



# The Big Pivot

*Manufacturers lean into the challenges posed by COVID-19, find they're not alone*

By Jeff Baker



PHOTO COURTESY SLEEK ADVERTISING LTD.

Depending who you ask, 2019 was a year that was particularly challenging for a multitude of reasons, or it was a time of the proverbial wine and roses. Perhaps it was something in the middle.

What many of us wouldn't give to go back to those days after living the last 10 years that has been 2020 so far.

Sure, okay... I'll dial back the pessimism a smidge. Even for me it's a bit much. Especially when we have no option but to keep calm, stay safe, and carry on.

But what can any of us actually do when there's a global pandemic and no clear path forward or no firm timeline back to the world we used to know?

In true Prairie form and in good ol' manufacturing spirit, companies and leaders across the sector and region have risen to the challenge. They've adapted their businesses, engaged with their employees, suppliers, and customers, and identified the opportunities hidden within the haze and uncertainty.

But what does this business adaptation look like? How did businesses make the journey from the initial shock of the pandemic, to figuring out which way was up, and to planning a measured and reasonable response - whatever that response would be?

That's been the big question for manufacturers not just across the Prairies, but in every country around the world.

It's been a story of the big pivot.

## Wait for the sign?

For Regina-based Sleek Advertising (also known as Sleek Signs), their experience with the big pivot was one of necessity.

Being in business for 20 years in the large format digital printing business, Sleek has experienced its share of ups and downs, just as any company has. In fact, 2019 was a great year, and the first bit of 2020 was looking fairly positive, too.

The company was the principal producer of signage for the Canadian Football League's Grey Cup events, and has

done extensive work for Regina Downtown, Mosaic Stadium, and major out-of-home advertising firms with large-format advertising products shipped from coast to coast to coast.

As Carl Weger, President and CEO of Sleek explained, "We had just moved into our new facility last summer. We went from 10,000 square feet to around 25,000 square feet, and we were looking to really scale up the business to take advantage of the new space."

Then the COVID-19 pandemic arrived.

"It was definitely a hit," says Weger, "but as a team we quickly looked into how we could potentially help with the local response."

## Doom with a side of hope

"We could see the doom and gloom in other parts of the world, so we knew some sort of challenge was coming our way, Weger explains, "but we really didn't know just what that challenge would be."

Looking at the news coverage beaming in from earlier COVID-19 hotspots including China, Iran, and Italy, the Sleek team could see that face masks and face shields were - and would be - in extremely high demand.

"We initially looked into producing face masks," said Weger, "but they were just going to be too difficult to fabricate with our specific skills and equipment."

Face shields, though, were a different story. They could be produced in-house by Sleek, using their own equipment and their own talent.

## It's not all easy peasy

Although it was an easy decision for the company to dive into face shields, Weger comments that there were plenty of other not-so-easy parts to the shift.

"Materials were evaporating from the market around the world, so we were working on shield designs that wouldn't require those things already in shortage."

Weger says, "The design work was the easy part. Trying to get certification from Health Canada and other required government agencies, and even getting through the public sector procurement processes takes a lot of time and energy, but we did get a medical device license in the end."

Despite the hurdles the company has faced in getting their product into government and public sector health agencies, they have found success in other sectors.

"We've actually had pretty good uptake for our shields in dental offices locally, and we've even shipped them as far as Boston where they're used in seniors' homes by frontline workers and for at-risk people in the service sector," says Weger.

## Continuous improvement, continuous flexibility

Weger credits his company's focus on continuous improvement as helping them weather the COVID-19 storm.

"We've always been strong believers in continuous improvement. It's given us the flexibility we needed to tackle this change," says Weger. "We were able to take on lots of input from our team, put these ideas through a flexible but systematic process, and come up with a number of product designs that have been helping our customers - old and new."

"This shift into PPE allowed us to keep almost all our team employed through the pandemic," Weger says, "and they've been totally engaged from the get-go."

Weger admits that he would never have thought the company would be holding a medical device license or selling protective equipment, and he definitely doesn't see himself selling PPE forever.

However, he says the pivot has allowed Sleek to survive, allowed the team to keep working, albeit in a different way, and they've been able to expand their reach into non-traditional clients.

## Putting the 'Win' in the sails

For some manufacturers, the pivot hasn't necessarily looked as dramatic, and it might not have taken them so far out of their comfort zone.

Chris Parker, Manager of Sustainability and Process Improvement with Winpak in Winnipeg, explains that the company's products were already essential before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

"We primarily make flexible packaging for meats and cheeses at this plant," says Parker. "Our products are part of the food supply chain, so we have been quite busy."

Nonetheless, there has been a shift in Winpak's business from the institutional and food service side of the industry to retail.

"In terms of production volume, there have been some record or near-record months, but it's definitely been challenging trying to meet the demand all the while implementing COVID prevention techniques," explains Parker. "Everything from social distancing and additional cleaning, to having a significant portion of our office staff working from home, we need to keep all our employees safe."

## Protecting food, protecting people

In the case of Winpak, it hasn't been a shift away from their usual business to use up slack capacity, rather they added to

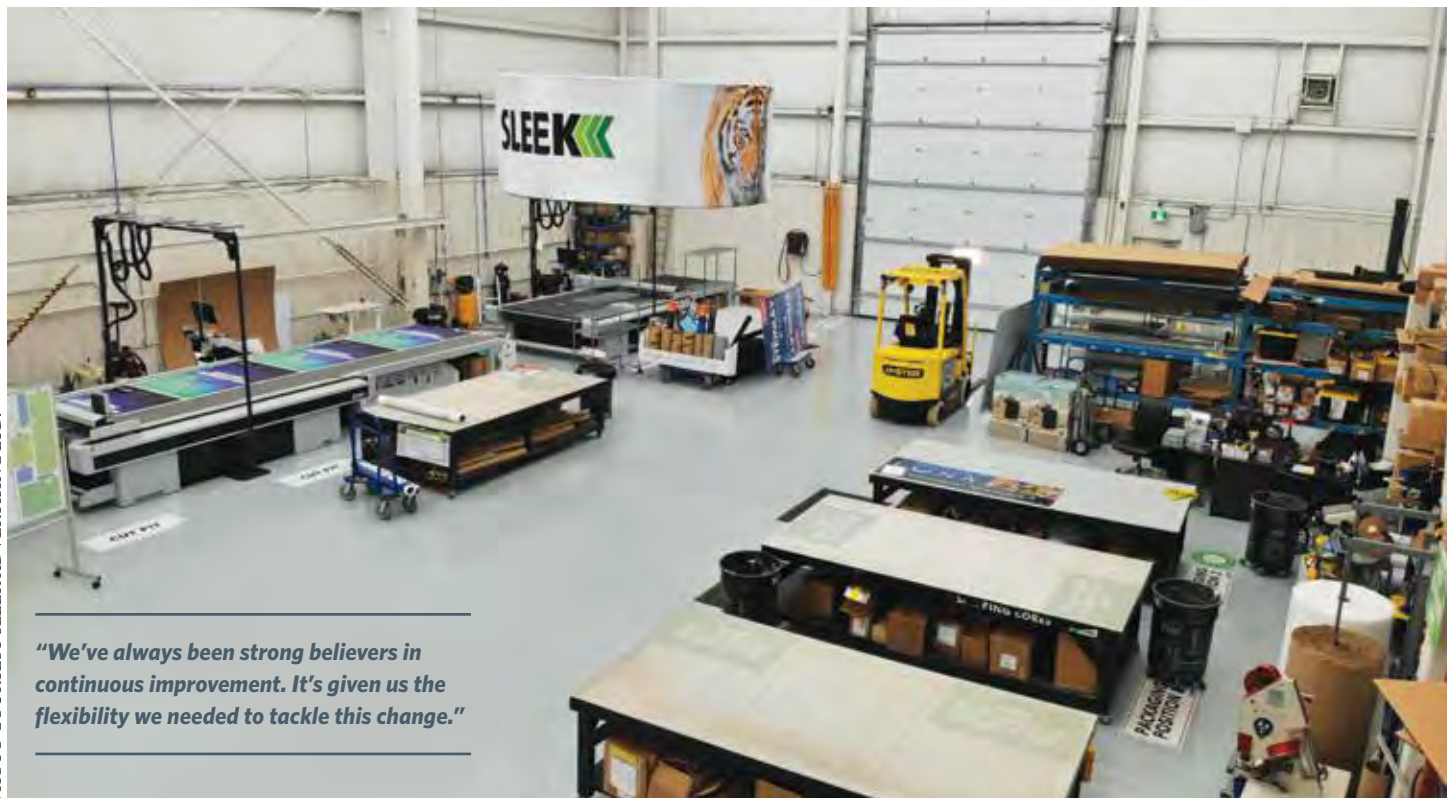


PHOTO COURTESY SLEEK ADVERTISING LTD.

---

*"We've always been strong believers in continuous improvement. It's given us the flexibility we needed to tackle this change."*

---



PHOTOS COURTESY WINPAK

their usual business by taking on PPE production, specifically face shields.

"There was obviously a requirement for PPE, and the Manitoba government approached CME Manitoba to see if there were companies that could take on production," says Parker.

"We happened to have some material on hand that was suitable and not really in demand at that point. Normally it would be used in semi-rigid food packaging, and we tried to source other material, but some suppliers were quoting lead times of eight to 10 weeks."

"So, we figured we should be able to cut this [material] up to work in a face shield design from Bauer that was available in the public domain," Parker says.

However, with Winpak's main business continuing at record pace, taking on more manufacturing and assembly wasn't going to be easy. That's where having a solid network of friends and partners like Sur-Seal, MacDon, and Hillary came in handy.

### It's good to have friends

"We partnered with Sur-Seal Packaging, because they were a company we were using to source various materials, and they were fairly well connected," says Parker. "They could get the supplies that were needed, and their business had slowed, so they had people they could contribute to the project."

"Our president and MacDon's president knew each other through business acquaintances, and MacDon said they'd be willing to participate and supply human resources for the assembly. Same with Hillary, who helped us make the rounded corners on the shields," Parker says.

"It was definitely a team effort. Everybody had different capacities and capabilities, but it all came together and worked out in the end."

### Coming together for the cause

By working together as partners, Winpak, MacDon, Sur-Seal, and Hillary were able to produce 10,000 shields a week for a six-week period.

"We were able to supply the government with 60,000 high-quality face shields," says Parker.

"We've since moved out of that business," Parker explains, "as there seems to be quite a few other companies that have geared up and perfected their products and production."

When asked what Winpak and its people have learned through this process, Parker says that just seeing people step-up and step out of their usual comfort zones is gratifying.

"Both internally and externally, seeing the efforts that people put into this to get it done, to see it be successful, it's just a really good story and a good example of teams coming together."

### Tough times create strong roots

In Saskatoon, Venables Machine Works has been delivering custom steel manufacturing services to their clients for nearly 90 years, including during the Great Depression and the Second World War.

"We started 2020 seeing a lot of promise, like other folks out there," says Dan Wingerak, Venables' Shop Manager, who has been with the company for more than 30 years.

Family-founded in 1931 and employee-owned today, the company was forced to lay off a portion of their workforce as the initial shock of the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

### The dark before the dawn

"Around March 30, we got together as a shop, and it was probably the most difficult discussion we ever had with our

team," Wingerak says. "We were going to lay off 23 people, despite being an essential service."

"In my 33 years with Venables, we've had the odd layoff, but there's never been anything so substantial," says Wingerak.

Fortunately, the layoffs for many of those employees were relatively short-lived. The company has since been able to bring back more than half of those people, and there is the possibility that the remainder could be recalled.

"We're just trying to stay busy with lots of different projects, and we're holding our own right now, which is a really good thing," Wingerak explains.

## Putting the pedal to the... plexi?

One of those projects for the Venables team was transparent protective shields for service desks and other customer-facing contact points in their clients' businesses. For a company used to working on heavy duty steel and other metals, working with plexiglass was definitely a change, but the technology involved was still familiar.

Wingerak says that despite most of Venables machinery being heavy industrial in nature, the company's water jets were perfect for cutting and profiling items like plexiglass screens.

"We were offering the screens to our core customers in an effort to help them stay open, and we're selling them at, basically, breakeven," says Wingerak.

## Bending the curve with help

Even with the company's early successes in manufacturing the plexiglass shields, the Venables team found themselves a bit behind the curve when it came to sourcing materials.

"We knew our limitations, and this project was outside our usual expertise, but we knew of a smaller local company who was doing work in this area, too, and had machinery more suited to the material," Wingerak says. "We approached them and said we wanted to partner in order to best serve all our customers."

Asked if this were a partnership that would have happened without the impetus of the COVID-19 pandemic, Wingerak says it wouldn't have necessarily been the case.

"COVID was definitely the catalyst," according to Wingerak.

## It's about who you know

The other company in the project partnership with Venables was Saskatoon Bag & Case (SBC), a manufacturer and distributor of high-performance and custom built hard- and soft-shell cases and foam inserts for a variety of sectors, including transportation and logistics.

Trevor Sonsteli, President and Owner of SBC says the partnership with Venables was a good fit for his company.

"We've known each other through business and events, and Dan [Wingerak] asked if we'd be able to cut some of the plastic materials for them," says Sonsteli. "We had the capacity and the expertise, so it just gelled, and we've been working together now for the last couple months."

## It's not unusual...

Similar to Venables, SBC has been fortunate through the pandemic so far, thanks to a fair share of their customer base being other essential businesses.

"Business did slow down a bit, and we did have to lay off a couple of people. But I was able to bring one of them back already," says Sonsteli. "We did lose a bit of traction - don't get me wrong - and the sales of face shields, masks, and barriers did help fill some voids, for sure."

"We never actually left our 'usual' business," Sonsteli says, "but we did add [PPE] into the mix and it will be a part of our business as long as there's demand for it."

## Complacency breeds contempt

When asked what he's learned so far since the COVID-19 pandemic blew up the world, Sonsteli says "I've been in business long enough to have learned that you can't take anything for granted. You can lose it all in a heartbeat."

"If you're not continuously diversifying and thinking well ahead, you'll become complacent, and you'll be left behind," says Sonsteli.

"You never want to waste a good crisis, and you want to make sure you know how to jump when that day comes." ❧

---

*"We knew our limitations, and this project was outside our usual expertise, but we knew of a smaller local company who was doing work in this area, too, and had machinery more suited to the material."*

---



PHOTOS COURTESY VENABLES MACHINE WORKS