



Walmart pivoted in days. Could your business handle the next shift, AI included?

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THE SHORT VERSION

Walmart pivoted in days during the 2020 shutdown because it scaled a process it already had.

The next disruption, AI included, will not give you months to decide, and making no decision is a decision.

A business that can pivot has three things ready: numbers it trusts, processes written down outside anyone's head, and a cash cushion.

I was driving into Walmart the other day and saw a lesson every business owner should take away.

Let's step back a few years to 2020. You likely remember where you were when you heard the world SHUT DOWN. I know I remember where I was.

The week before, I'd done my regular run for toilet paper and groceries. Within days, we were sitting at our last archery lesson listening to people panic about buying up toilet paper and paper products, like a snowstorm was on the horizon.

Phil and I (and the kids) were in Florida picking up the boat his dad was passing down to us. We'd heard the rumors that they might shut things down. We were standing in his parents' driveway when we heard it was official. Everything was locked down, and only essential workers could move about. I remember having to strategize our way home, worried they'd start closing highways between states.

Almost overnight in March of 2020, the world changed.

Things were no longer "business as usual." Restaurants had to close because people couldn't come in, sit, socialize, and eat. Our daughter was furloughed for 2 weeks while the store she worked at figured out how they were going to keep running.

Then there was Walmart

I'm not sure if you remember, but Walmart had pickup before the shutdown. I vaguely remember some sort of pickup process, but I can't say I'd ever really used it. I was a walk-the-aisles, grocery list, budget, and calculator kind of shopper.

But when the world shut down, Walmart didn't sit on the decision for months trying to figure out how to deliver. They didn't wait for sales to fall to decide how they'd respond.

It seemed to me that almost overnight they had an app that let you order. They had time slots and pickup spaces.

They implemented an entire SYSTEM within what seemed like days of the shutdowns. They rolled out massive changes to their operations, processes, and even staff with almost flawless precision. They turned cashiers into personal shoppers to serve their communities.

Let that sink in for a minute.

Grocery stores had historically, read that as DECADES, sold their product through 1 streamlined system. They had tweaked and worked on one thing: getting groceries to people who needed groceries.

They bought the product.

People came in and shopped.

And people left with said product.

That's it. That was the whole model.

They had optimized that process over many years of reading data and making decisions on that data. They tweaked. They streamlined. They optimized.

Then the world shut down and everything changed.

There weren't days, let alone years, to figure out how to pivot and still provide for people. People still needed groceries. They still needed toilet paper (remember that?!). The need didn't go away. But the SYSTEM had to change.

Walmart didn't hesitate. They went ALL IN on a process they already had and scaled it faster than anyone thought possible.

Because they were able to pivot.

That's the lesson.

The climate of the world and every industry is ever changing. Just because something has worked for 10, 20, or 50 years doesn't mean it will work the same way tomorrow. And when it stops working, it doesn't always give you a heads up.

So what will be the pivot point in your industry?

Will it be an AI interruption?

A staffing demographic change?

A shift in what your clients expect from you?

Something none of us can even see yet?

I don't know what yours will be. But I promise you, it's coming.

And when it does, you won't have months to sit on the decision either. The saying "time kills all deals" is true. Many people stagnate or fail not because they didn't try hard, but because they didn't make a decision.

What we miss, especially as business owners, is that making no decision IS a decision. Getting locked up in decision fatigue or uncertainty is a decision. It's the decision not to move.

Here's the reality. It's ok to make a decision and have it not work out like you thought. But the faster you make that decision, the faster you can course correct if it's a miss.

So the question isn't IF you'll need to pivot. It's whether your business is able to pivot when it happens.

What Does It Take to Pivot?

1. Data

You need to know your numbers. You need to understand how you acquire customers, how much it costs to run your business, and how much it costs to scale. Your numbers need to be tight enough that you can use them to make decisions.

I'll add a caveat here. As a business owner, sometimes the numbers tell you a decision isn't the right one, but your gut says it is. The reality is, by KNOWING your numbers, you'll see how fast they change. You'll understand what the pivot is actually doing, and you'll be able to adjust in real time.

2. Processes

Where do your processes live? In a system where your team can find them? In your head? Or WORSE, in an employee's head?

Let me illustrate this with a short story. About 3 years ago, I got a call from another accountant. She had recently bought a bookkeeping firm, mostly so she could keep an administrative assistant turned bookkeeper employed. She was very close with this bookkeeper.

One Friday, she didn't hear from her. By Sunday, they'd discovered she had sadly passed away.

She called me to see if I wanted to take on the bookkeeping for all of those clients. She had little idea how much time most of them took or what they really needed. When her bookkeeper passed, she was stuck in the tough spot of figuring out, all over again, how to care for these clients.

Sometimes we choose how an employee leaves. Sometimes we don't. Sometimes they change industries, change jobs, or win the lottery. Often, when employees leave, it's sudden and unexpected.

And 1 thing I can promise you after years of working with business owners: if they give you 2 weeks' notice, it will NOT be long enough to train someone else on everything they know.

Walmart wasn't successful because they wrote a whole new process. They were successful so quickly because they only had to SCALE a process that already existed.

3. Cash Cushion

When a pivot lands on your desk, is there enough cash to carry you through it? Do you even know?

What gets measured gets managed. Do you measure your cash? Do you keep a cushion in the bank account, or is every dollar already spoken for?

Pivots cost money. And it's a whole lot easier to make a clear decision when you're not panicking about making payroll.

So Ask Yourself

- Do you know your numbers well enough to make a fast decision?
- Are your processes written down, or do they live in your head?
- Does your team know how to adapt, or only how to do it the way it's always been done?
- Do you have enough cushion to make a change without panicking?

Walmart didn't know a pandemic was coming. Nobody did. But they had built a business that could turn on a dime when it needed to.

That's what I want for every business owner.

Not to predict the future. Just to be ready for it.

So, what's the pivot point in YOUR industry? And are you ready for it?

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