

How NetFlorist pivoted to essential goods in 36 hours

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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Ryan Bacher, co-founder and MD of NetFlorist, says he's never worked harder than he has during the last two months - a believable statement considering the online retailer, one of South Africa's oldest, completely transformed its product offering during the nationwide lockdown.



Ryan Bacher

The Covid-19 pandemic gained a foothold in South Africa in March, and a Level-5 lockdown loomed which would force all retailers selling non-essential goods to halt trade completely for at least one month. NetFlorist, which is traditionally a gift and flower delivery service, braced itself for disruption.

“In March we had a sense that lockdown was coming and we knew that, based on what happened in other countries, it would prioritise essential services. About 10 days before the beginning of lockdown we decided to move to an essential product. We thought food would be the best option for us and started selling fruit and vegetables,” said Bacher.

He was speaking in a presentation during the PayFast eCommerce Virtual Summit hosted by Insaka eCommerce Academy last week, where he shared the survival journey of NetFlorist during lockdown and its pivot to next-day grocery deliveries.



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Lauren Hartzenberg 25 May 2020



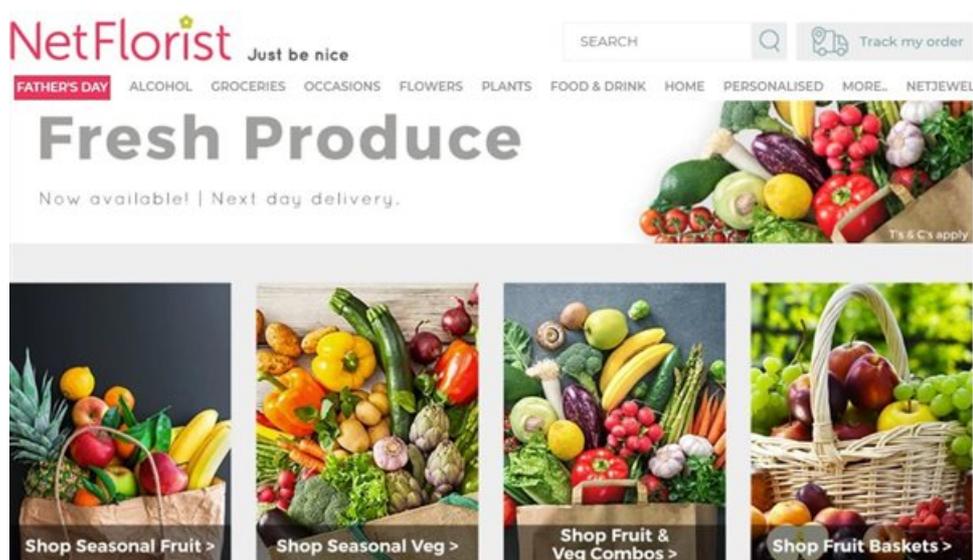
A swift shift

After partnering with fresh produce wholesaler and distributor Fruitspot, and obtaining the required essential services certificate, NetFlorist paused its flower and gifting deliveries and officially started selling boxes of fruit and vegetables on 1 April.

Bacher said that due to the nature of the NetFlorist business, the changes could be implemented relatively quickly.

“We’ve got our online facility, warehouses and delivery vehicles, so it was reasonably easy for us to bolt on fruit and veg. We did it in a quick time, from thinking about it on around the 20th of March we then soft-launched it in about 36 hours,” he said.

As the company’s warehouses and vehicles are already cooled for flowers, this also made them suitable to store and transport fresh produce.



Shortly after announcing its fresh produce offering, NetFlorist [expanded to groceries](#), including pantry and refrigerator essentials. To deliver this service, the retailer teamed up with Makro.

“We approached Makro, who we work with, and asked them if we could essentially work from inside their warehouse. With some of our own staff members inside their distribution centre, we loaded a core range of Makro’s onto our website and we started offering their products.”

Bacher revealed that allowing online customers to add numerous items to a basket presented a technology challenge for the NetFlorist team, but with limited time-frames they were forced to work with what they had.

“Our customer usually buys one or maybe two items to be delivered to somebody, so our site wasn’t built at all for 20 or 30 items in a grocery basket. We didn’t have time to build anything new, so we just altered what we did have and customised it according to new needs.”



NetFlorist delivers grocery essentials during lockdown

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Innovating for survival

Bacher said the temporary move to essential goods kept NetFlorist alive during April. “Selling fruit and veg we certainly didn’t do anywhere near the revenue we normally do, but it allowed some revenue to flow in and for us to employ and pay some staff. We’re thankful for that.”

He added, “It also gave me, my partners and the management team a sense of purpose in a way. We realised that we had an asset that could help during this time... not in an altruistic way, we charged for the service, but we could play a role and get up and do stuff, and for me personally that was very important.”

The business pivot didn’t come without hurdles. Confusion around whether the sale of flowers was permitted during Level 4 in May, when agricultural regulations eased, resulted in one of NetFlorist’s drivers being arrested during a roadblock while moving flowers between hubs.

The incident occurred the Thursday before Mother’s Day - one of NetFlorist’s busiest periods of the year. “We were stuck; we didn’t know how things would play out over the next week. We’d started getting a lot of orders for Mother’s Day and there was a chance our drivers would be arrested while delivering.”

NetFlorist managed to pull off a successful Mother’s day, bringing in some much-needed revenue and putting the business in a position to employ a host of temporary drivers to help fulfil orders.



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Looking ahead

With [restrictions lifted on e-commerce](#), the company can now offer its full range, but Bacher remains cautiously optimistic about business in the short-term.

“We think our corporate orders will be down significantly since many companies aren’t back at work yet, and those that are we don’t think will be focused on flowers and gifts as things are tough right now. We don’t know what will happen to our consumer business. We used to say that hope isn’t a strategy, but we’ve changed that, we think that hope *is* a strategy at this point.

“Perhaps because of social distancing and people not being able to see each other on special occasions, our service will become especially important. But we may be wrong, because consumers could be severely cash-strapped. We’re managing business day to day and managing costs very carefully, trying to be as innovative as we can.”

Reflecting on recent lessons learned, Bacher said he’s begun reassessing previous standards of business efficiency.

“We’ve been able to do a lot in a short space of time these past few weeks, much more than we’ve done in maybe a year. We developed new ideas, got them up and running and got them to market quickly. I’ve started to think maybe we’ve become inefficient and we need to relearn agility in our business.

“There have been so many examples in the last few weeks of making decisions we’ve struggled to make for a long time. Suddenly faced with little choice, tough decisions became so easy to make,” Bacher said.

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