

When Life Gives You Corona We Bring Limes

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By Jill Fopiano, President & CEO at O'Brien Wealth Partners



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When we shut O'Brien's doors on March 13, 2020, little did we know what was to come. Two weeks, maybe a month. That's how long we thought it might be until we were back in our office. Flash forward and it has been almost a year. Our offices remain mostly empty, and we're still working remotely. Fortunately, our clients and our team are healthy and safe. But here's the biggest surprise: these many months of socially distant contact have strengthened—not diminished—our relationships. It turns out that endless hours of Zooming have us feeling closer than ever before. How can that be true? How could a lack of physical contact actually boost connection?

In many ways, O'Brien was well prepared to operate remotely. Some of us already worked from home occasionally as family and other commitments required. Strict IT, cyber security, and other back office

protocols eased our transition procedurally. But asking our clients to stop seeing their advisors face-to-face for an indefinite period of time? Losing in-person contact just as a pandemic threw global economies into a tailspin, shut down whole industries, spooked financial markets, sickened thousands of people, and threw millions of Americans out of work? Uncharted territory.

Amid chaos, connection

Ours is a high-touch business. In creating the integrated, customized financial roadmaps we provide, our advisors get to know our clients really well—their challenges, achievements, dreams, and goals. Where they've been and where they want to go. It's a lot of information, and it gives advisors deep insight into their clients' lives. At least that's what we thought.

Before Corona virus safety protocols kicked in, O'Brien advisors and clients had a fair number of regular face-to-face meetings—in addition to telephone check-ins. Established clients and advisors usually met at least two to three times a year. New clients and advisors often saw each other more frequently in the early months of their relationship before settling into that rhythm. These days, many advisors and clients are Zooming just as often – and everyone is seeing—and saying—even more.

Communicating on a whole new level

More is more. It's also different. Besides dialing up the volume of communication, Corona also *altered* the nature of our communication. Initially, client conversations focused less on portfolios and more on the general Covid-19 pandemonium unfolding. Advisors reassured clients that amid this crisis, their financial affairs were in order. They shared aspects of how the pandemic was affecting their own lives, too. This situation was unprecedented. Perhaps experiencing it together is what expanded our already close connection.

Zoom gave clients and advisors a new visual perspective on each other as well. As Lis Zimmerman, O'Brien Principal and Chief Financial Planning Strategist said, "I've heard years and years of life stories from many of my clients. With Zoom calls, I'm getting to see some of these things in person, from their home renovations to beloved pieces of art and even their pets."

The new revelations go both ways. Again, Lis gave a perfect example: "Sometimes, my clients ask me to move the camera so they can get a better view of my loyal home officemate, my dog Sam."

Making Covid necessities the mother of other inventions

Of course, working remotely also posed internal operational challenges. Our integrated, team-based approach made for a lot of daily, in-person communication. Gone were the impromptu pop-ins to each other's offices and lunchtime kitchen gatherings. Regularly scheduled meetings for the entire staff, management committee, and the financial and investment committees all vanished, too. In their place, we have daily Zoom catch-up calls, and the occasional Zoom lunch to share personal and professional news. Like our client Zoom calls, this shift has generated a new level of closeness between us.

Covid-19 also disrupted—and improved—other longstanding office traditions, like our annual holiday celebrations. We kept the holiday spirit alive. We just found new ways to do it. This year we partnered with the secret Santa service Elfster to randomly assign a secret Santa for each employee. Employees also provided a list of local businesses and restaurants in their towns, and gift givers chose among them or researched on their own. Not only did we support local businesses, we also learned more about each other and the places

we live. One example was an employee whose father-in-law had been visiting and doing most of the cooking. Due to the pandemic, he had to return to his native country. For that employee, one gift option was virtual cooking lessons from a neighborhood chef or restaurant. And just like that, a new O'Brien holiday tradition was born.

Which Way Forward?

Taking stock of 2020, I was pleased at how smoothly our team adapted in the face of unprecedented uncertainty and change. Managing market volatility and risk is a fact of life in the investment world, and it's something we are quite comfortable with and well prepared for. But dealing with a fast-spreading global pandemic presented our clients and us with a whole new level of challenge.

And the result is? So far, so good. In a very volatile investment environment, we have continued to grow along with our clients. If anything, this whole experience has reinforced our bedrock assumption that connection and communication lie at the heart of our time-tested, winning formula.

Once Covid-related restrictions disappear, many businesses plan to reduce their real estate footprints. Some are considering a permanent shift to remote work. At this point we are not. We are genuinely delighted with how well clients, advisors, and colleagues have connected and communicated in the "Zoom world" and how it gives us more options for working together. But we are all looking forward to the day we can shake your hand, give you a hug, or sit down with you at our conference room table and look you in the eye. In person.

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Jill Fopiano, President & CEO at O'Brien Wealth Partners

Jill A. Fopiano, President & CEO

Jill Fopiano joined O'Brien Wealth Partners LLC in September 2012 as a Principal. In October 2016 she became the Chief Executive Officer, Chief Investment Officer, and majority owner of the firm.

Possessing more than twenty years of experience at major global banks, Jill brings unique perspective and capability in both institutional investments and private banking. Jill's global financial career at Citi and US Trust spanned alternative investments, trading, and financial planning and wealth management. She is now dedicated to leading an independent wealth management firm providing institutional quality investment management and integrated financial planning, with an intimate client experience possible only at a boutique firm.

As a Chartered Financial Analyst, Jill is a member of the CFA Institute and the Boston Society of Securities Analysts. Jill is also a Certified Financial Planner™ and an Accredited Domestic Partnership Advisor (ADPA™). Jill holds an MBA from the Yale School of Management and a BA in French from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Jill and her two sons live in Brookline and Orleans, MA.

Areas of Expertise:

Wealth Management, Investment Advisory, Strategic Financial Planning, Retirement Planning, Estate Planning.
Financial Empowerment of Women

Organizations/Accomplishments:

Jill's involvement in the local arts community has included the Advisory Board of A.R.T., the Board of Overseers of the Boston Conservatory, and the Board of Directors of Opera Boston. As a member of the Women President's Organization, Jill is also committed to mentoring and advancing women owned businesses in the Boston area. In her free time she is an avid baseball mom and can sometimes be found as a stand-in third base coach at her son's Little League games.