COVID-19: Interview with Melanie Aronson, Founder and CEO of Panion

Online community-building provider Panion helps companies build, manage, and engage their workforce by providing a digital social space. Maddyness spoke with Melanie Aronson, Founder and CEO to understand how their company is coping during the COVID-19 pandemic and what the future holds.

Temps de lecture : minute

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[Maddyness] What is the biggest professional challenge for you today?

[Melanie] Right now I am learning to navigate the world of B2B sales as Panion recently pivoted from a primarily B2C business model. I am also trying to figure out how to adapt a product originally intended to help people build more meaningful connections in person into a digital tool that accommodates both virtual and real-life socializing.

Shifting to incorporate virtual experiences has been both interesting and challenging. Quarantine has forced us to reimagine Panion's purpose. In a way, it's forced us to create a better product. We've had to get creative and iterate quickly which I think actually made our team stronger and helped strengthen what we have to offer.

What is the biggest personal challenge today?

Before Panion I worked as a freelancer in the film industry. While I have delegated tasks and project managed I had no real experience managing a team. In the last couple of years, I've had to learn how to hire, grow, and manage a team and that has come with a lot of personal challenges. For one, confidence.

As a solo founder, I have to believe wholeheartedly that my vision is worth building so much so that I can motivate others around it. I've also had to develop coping mechanisms to tackle my own anxiety around all the responsibility that being a founder comes with. Not knowing where the next money will come from puts a lot of pressure on me especially when considering my team and making sure they feel secure and have jobs in the near future.

That said, I've been able to surround myself with some truly amazing people. Their support has been instrumental in my being able to grow Panion to what it is today and personally has helped me survive living alone in quarantine for a number of months now.

Is remote working a new thing for you?

While a number of people on my team have been working remotely for a while now, this is the first time that all of us have gone remote together.

When we all left the office during COVID-19, I was honestly concerned that productivity would be affected, but in fact, the opposite has happened. While it's taken us a bit of time to adjust, we are more motivated and connected than ever before.

I miss working in the office and believe face-to-face interactions cannot be

replaced. However, I'm learning to adjust and I feel inspired to work even harder to provide a tool to help teams stay socially connected no matter where they are.

How do you keep your employees happy?

I try to avoid a top-down approach to leadership and decision-making. We have a truly collaborative environment where everyone's input is valued highly. I try to make my employees feel heard and respected. I think if you choose the right teammates this comes naturally because I actually do value their opinions and respect them all tremendously.

Every day we start with a standup meeting. To be honest, it's normally my favourite part of the day because it's when I'm most social during these times. We all check in on each other and normally there's some silly banter before we get down to business. I encourage a healthy amount of informal conversation because it creates a genuine connection.

Behind the scenes, we are actually friends. Sometimes that makes things complicated, but overall, it improves our trust. We're a startup and we rely on each other. There can't be any weak links. Social connection really helps instil a sense of belonging and responsibility in everyone on the team.

As a leader, what do you do to successfully manage your mental resilience amid lockdown?

Maintaining a solid routine that involves social connection, exercise and healthy eating habits keep me centred. I try to maintain a work-life balance and to find activities away from my screen like reading, meditating or spending time with my cats.

What changes have you made to keep your business running?

We have recently given up our office. I think that we are all learning that having an office is somewhat of a luxury. If we can all get our jobs done while working remotely, it's an added cost we don't need right now.

Fortunately, my small team is invested in Panion's future and understands that we are foregoing the cushy salaries now so we can make something big happen in the near future.

We've cut down on all unnecessary "nice-to-have" costs and have consolidated productivity tools and have optimized our technology to find more efficient ways to operate our service.

What have you implemented to stay competitive?

We designed Panion to help individuals form meaningful connections in person in order to improve their well-being. When people started going on lockdown, we had to get really creative.

That's why we decided to focus on Panion Communities, a tool to help remote teams stay connected. We want to continue making an impact on people's social well-being and realized we could do so by adjusting our product to focus on large networks in addition to individuals.

How is your relationship with your investors?

I truly feel lucky to have found the investors that I've found. All of them have one way or another contributed to Panion's success, beyond their financial contributions. To be honest, I am proud of myself for finding such

supportive and encouraging investors. I feel I have a group of mentors to whom I can always ask for advice and who I know want the best for me and for Panion.

It feels great when an investor emails you to introduce you to someone, or because they read an article that made you come to mind. I have learned that it is important to be selective about the people with whom you share your company because ultimately they are an extended part of your team, must understand your mission, and be someone you feel comfortable talking to about the challenges ahead.

What advice would you give startup founders to keep managing costs and cash flow efficiently during a crisis?

We have really reduced things down to a minimum with the priority on keeping our app running and our team paid. Ask yourself what the bare bone minimum is to stay afloat and slash everything else. Think of creative ways to start monetizing fast. Perhaps that's offering a COVID-19 discount or reaching out to additional verticals who could use your product in an unintended way.

What do you think of the support packages for startups offered by the government? What have you been able to use? Unfortunately, we haven't qualified for any major relief packages. We do appreciate the reduced employee tax rates and that there are loans available if we need them. Fingers crossed our sales will continue to increase and we won't need them.

Do you feel confident in your business post-

COVID?

As a remote work solution, I am highly confident that we will not only survive but thrive. If we hadn't been able to pivot so quickly, I think the future would be a lot less clear, but with hard work and creativity, there's a bright future ahead for us. As a company tackling loneliness, isolation, and connectivity, it couldn't be a more opportune time.

Are there any changes in society/economy that you think will help you?

Remote work may become the new normal. We've realized we can live without an office, and we are hearing of large companies changing their policies to allow more flexibility around working from home.

However, remote workers are at risk for feeling isolated and disconnected from their co-workers so require extra care when it comes to managing their well-being. I think companies are becoming increasingly aware of these needs and the demand for community engagement tools like Panion will increase.

COVID-19: Interview with Tessa Clarke, Co-Founder and CEO of Olio

Article by Maddyness