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Good advice, Northumberland

Richard Shell, owner of award-winning hospitality business
The Doxford Group, offers advice for any Northumberland
based tourism business:

- Believe in yourself and your business
- Take time to enhance finer details of your business
- Don't be afraid to diversify your offering
- Always be open to new opportunities
- Make sure your customers are informed

Across the country, the COVID pandemic has adversely affected the tourism and hospitality sector. Visit Northumberland has championed real stories from businesses who have adapted, pivoted and triumphed to inspire others. Discover more Northumberland tourism businesses that have delivered a #goodjobnorthumberland.


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Good job The Doxford Group

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We didn't have the answers to give to our customers.

With record levels of wedding bookings across two Northumberland venues, Doxford Barns and Charlton Hall, 2020 was set to be The Doxford Group's most rewarding year yet explains owner Richard Shell. "We couldn't wait to see our wedding couples. We had exciting plans to build 12 new bedrooms to service their guests and other visitors who wished to enjoy the area."

Then, after five successful years, lockdown brought his plans and revenue streams, to an abrupt halt.

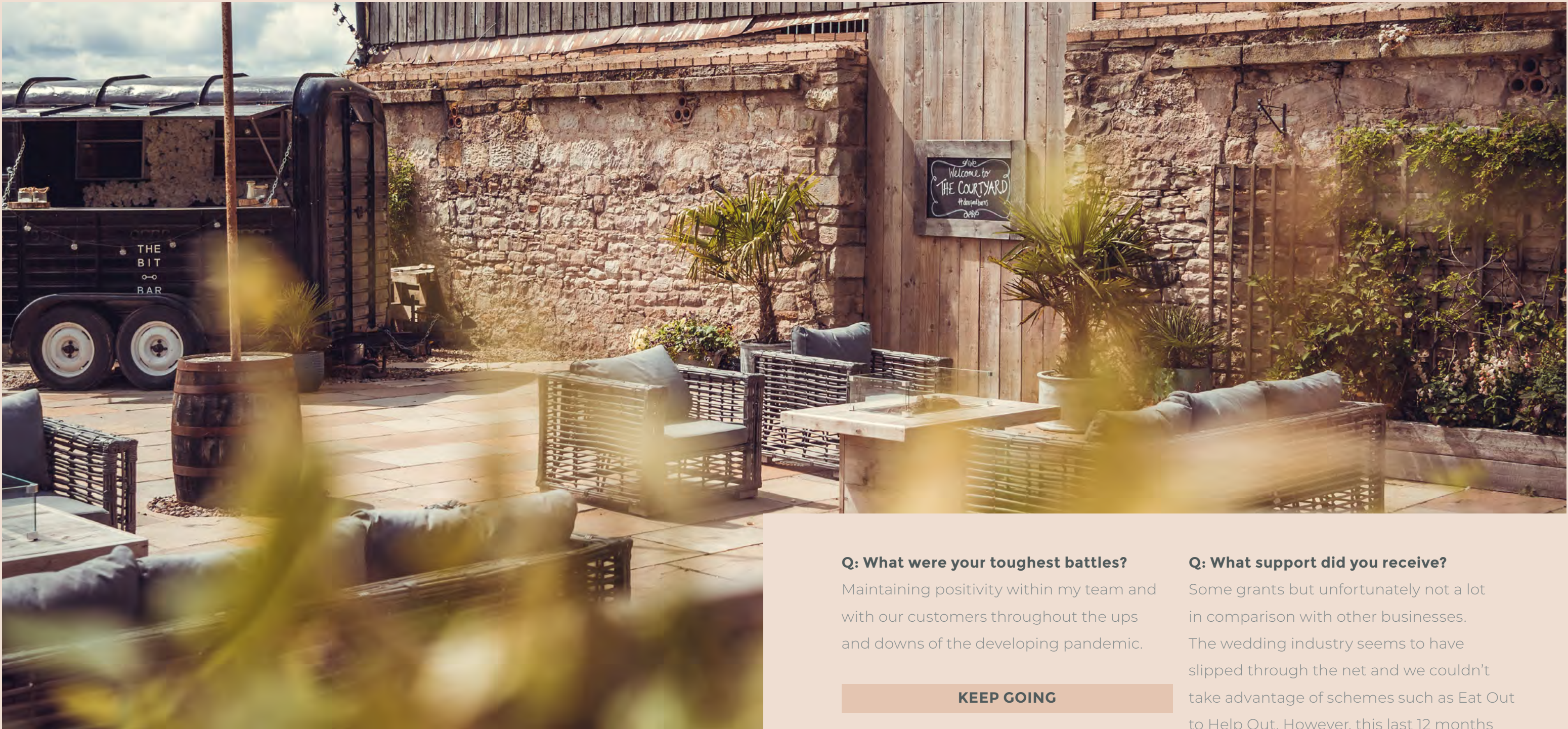
Q: How quickly was business affected?

The moment news started to spiral about COVID-19, our couples and guests panicked, from then on, the moving and postponements just intensified. After the PM's announcement we closed our doors completely until summer 2020 when some restrictions began to lift. Some staff worked from home, some were furloughed, and this has continued over the last 12 months.

Q: What did it feel like?

It was quite simply awful. Like someone had just taken away everything you'd worked so hard for. The lack of clarity and constant changes from the government meant that each day felt like we were fighting fires. We didn't have the answers to give to our customers. Next to zero income being generated. Our sector relies solely on people visiting our venues, with that removed, we cannot operate.





Q: What were your toughest battles?

Maintaining positivity within my team and with our customers throughout the ups and downs of the developing pandemic.

Q: What support did you receive?

Some grants but unfortunately not a lot in comparison with other businesses. The wedding industry seems to have slipped through the net and we couldn't take advantage of schemes such as Eat Out to Help Out. However, this last 12 months has made businesses support each other. Wedding venues don't tend to talk to each other, but during lockdown this changed, and venues were sharing experiences and knowledge. I also had lots of support from family and friends, not to mention my team who have been incredible during the pandemic.

KEEP GOING

Q: What kept you going?

Giving up isn't in my nature, but the struggles we faced as a business throughout were really difficult. I always look at a situation and see how I can turn it into a positive and try to come out of it better. Knowing that the business has such exciting plans helped. Not having customers in the venues for the majority of 2020/2021, allowed us space and time to better our offerings. As a team, we're really proud of what we've created over the last 12 months.





THE RESPONSE

Q: What changes did you make to the business?

We had to diversify in many ways. We set up non-wedding events hosting date nights, bottomless brunches, Sunday lunches and more. We diversified our accommodation to allow more guests and customers into our venues. You can now stay in Charlton Hall itself, or in our new external accommodation, any day of the year.

Q: Have your changes paid off?

Yes, and we plan to continue our events as we have lots of repeat customers. Our bookings have been incredible, which gave us the green light to build a further 15 bedrooms, a restaurant, bar and meeting facilities within the Charlton Hall Estate by 2022. In 2017, we purchased Charlton Hall and it had just 8 bedrooms, soon we'll have 46. Also, despite such a challenging year, Charlton Hall won two Best Venue awards – this was a great boost for everyone.

Q: Has this changed long-term business for you?

Following the airline's stance on travel, I believe domestic staycations are going to rocket and that's why we've worked so hard to create more accommodation.

Q: What have you learned from this situation?

It's brought me back to basics. From operating successfully for five years to being told you won't generate anything for the foreseeable, it makes you think about the finer elements of the business, which perhaps I overlooked during busy periods. The phrase I've said most to my team recently is, "If you can get through this, you can get through anything."

GOOD ADVICE

Q: What advice can you offer other business owners?

Believe in yourself and your dreams (cheesy but true). Have faith in what you have built and don't be afraid to follow other avenues. Always be open to new opportunities. Try something new because it may just pay off. Don't overlook the finer elements of the business. Take time and make them better as they will make you and your business stronger at the end of it.

GOOD JOB

Q: How do you define doing a good job?

Over the last year, just surviving. Making sure your customers stay informed and are happy. Also, we wanted to ensure that we come out the other side bigger and better than ever before. Now, our future is bright.