The Art Of The Product Pivot:
Ministry Of Supply Pivots Entire Brand In Just 45 Day

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Introduction

Looking back, it's clear that 2020 was a breakout year for clothing start-up Ministry of Supply. Just not in the ways they expected.

A New York Times profile of the company published on March 4th, 2021 perfectly explains the dilemma the company faced:

> "Ministry of Supply is one of millions of small businesses that were blindsided by the pandemic, though it was hit especially hard as a company that sold work clothing when almost everyone stopped going to the office."

That is where the story of Ministry of Supply could have ended. Instead, Ministry of Supply thrives.

2020 saw at least 30 major retail bankruptcies according to a running list compiled by the trade publication Retail Dive. An estimated 9,500 storefronts have gone dark.

In contrast, Ministry of Supply was able to rapidly adapt to change and completely pivot its entire product line in record time.

Ministry of Supply is now a recognized market leader in the "work leisure" or "hybrid clothing lines" predicted to be high-growth areas for retail.

Company President and Co-Founder [Gihan Amarasiriwardena](#) says Scrum is a big reason the start-up succeeded where so many established, deep-pocketed brands failed.

Background

Early 2020 was a time to celebrate at Ministry of Supply. After all, the brand was growing. Fast.

Founded by two Massachusetts Institute of Technology students who were '[hacking clothing](#)' while their peers hacked code, the company brought its first product to market in 2012 thanks to a Kickstarter campaign.

Ministry of Supply soon was offering a wide range of products made from space-age, high-performance fabrics but all with an office aesthetic. Machine washable suits, moisture-wicking, wrinkle-free blazers, their [Apollo dress shirts](#) that absorb heat when you're too hot, then release that heat back to you when you cool down.

Literally, stuff created by NASA.

"Saving time is a big priority for our customers," explains Amarasiriwardena, "our products are designed with that in mind. You save time when you don't have to go to the dry cleaner and when you don't have to change clothes when you get home from work to hang out with your kids."

By 2018, Ministry of Supply had seen two consecutive years of 40% growth.

Sales reached $14 million in 2019. That number was projected to jump to $22 million in 2020. A popular clothing subscription company was distributing their wares, along with five successful brick-and-mortar stores. A sixth location was about to open in the tawny Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, D.C.

By mid-March of 2020, that all changed.

COVID And An Existential Threat

The first wave of pandemic-related stay-at-home orders meant they had to scuttle the grand opening of the Georgetown store.

Like all of us, Ministry of Supply leadership hoped the pandemic restrictions would be short-lived. They weren't.

Demand for office apparel evaporated almost overnight.

[They started selling (and donating) masks](#) to help fill an urgent need in the market. While this generated much-needed cash flow it was not enough to sustain the company. But they held on.

Ministry of Supply leadership, like us, thought life and routines would return to normal by May, then June. Surely by July.

But as the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, stay-at-home orders went from temporary measures to the norm.

By the end of summer, Amarasiriwardena and his team came to a realization. "People weren't wearing belts and they weren't wearing brown shoes." And they wouldn't be in the foreseeable future.

Belts and brown shoes are accessories that complement their products. This represented an existential threat to the company.

"We couldn't just wait this out and hope to sell dress shirts and blazers again in six months," explains Amarasiriwardena, "we had to redevelop our product. We had to reposition our brand."

The threat was compounded by the calendar.

Supply chains in the apparel industry are dominated by long lead times. It can take six to 12 months for a new offering to be designed, then stitched, then sold. Amarasiriwardena says that lead time can easily jump to 18 months given the kinds of high-tech, reactive fabrics Ministry of Supply relies on.

It was now August of 2020, and pandemic or no, the holidays were effectively right around the corner. The Ministry of Supply had to have relevant clothing to sell, and quickly, or they would lose out on the biggest shopping time of the year.

Scrum And Scrum@Scale At Ministry of Supply

Amarasiriwardena and his co-founder were already acquainted with the fundamentals of Scrum. They had read both *Scrum: The Art of Doing Twice The Work In Half The Time* and *The Scrum Fieldbook*.

Some Scrum elements, like the Daily Scrum, had long been a part of the workflow at Ministry of Supply.

But given the situation they now faced, they knew they needed more.

So they partnered with Scrum Inc. to ensure they fully implemented both frameworks and not just their component parts.

"I think what we learned was Scrum is best learned through implementing it," explains Amarasiriwardena, "So we said let's commit to it. We didn't have clarity around what the world's going to look like in much more than two to three months. Let's make sure we're able to adapt quickly to whatever lies ahead."

Creating A Cross-Functional Adaptive Organization

Like many organizations, Ministry of Supply's original structure was defined by expertise says Amarasiriwardena. Specifically established silos of design, make and sell. "I think the great part of Scrum," he says, "was it gave us a reason to work cross-functionally."

The original structure he adds was good for function work, "but not the important cross-functional work of moving the business forward."

So, teams were reorganized into cross-functional Scrum Teams. Backlogs were used so work was visible to all. Ministry of Supply works in two-week Sprints and they incorporated their own customized innovation we'll describe below.

Speed and productivity soon increased. As did morale. "In Scrum work is gamified and it plays into psychology really well. People love moving cards over. They love

seeing the point ticker go up. And at the end of the week," adds Amarasiriwardena, "people know they had an awesome week. There's this feeling of high presence. Impact. Scrum helped that."

Aligning On Vision And Value

Leadership had a vision; recreate and relaunch products and have the brand ~~to~~ go from office apparel with a high-tech twist to high-performance work-leisure clothing that allowed customers to be comfortable while still looking professional. The kind of apparel that allows customers to hop on their Peleton in between Zoom meetings without missing a beat.

"We had this dream board in July and August," remembers Amarasiriwardena, "We knew where we needed to go. What we didn't have prior to Scrum was an efficient way to break down that vision into segments to get them done fast."

Ministry of Supply also needed alignment across the board and prioritization based on delivering business value in the optimal order. "We had to delineate what was important now versus what can we do later," which, as Amarasiriwardena states, "is exactly what the grooming of the backlog is all about."

Using the Scrum@Scale framework kept the teams aligned.

The frameworks, he adds, "allowed us to do that because it allowed us to see these pathways." They had more visibility into weaknesses, opportunities, and the gaps in between.

Amarasiriwardena firmly believes that Scrum and Scrum@Scale were critical elements of the success that was to come.

Results

When demand evaporates, most retailers deeply discount their products as a last-ditch effort to sell what they can. This does create some return on their investment, but it's often a short-term move with little to no strategic benefits for the organization.

Amarasiriwardena and Ministry of Supply decided to take another approach; they would pivot all of their affected products and their entire brand identity. "We thought why not invest in our inventory? The difference between the discount and the cost to pivot would net out the same." So, he adds, "we decided to make a relevant product that delivers value now rather than liquidating the product we had."

They knew the high-tech fabrics they were known for could be relevant for work-leisure wear. However, the silhouettes and cut of the products were not.
And, they couldn't rely on their established supply chain to pivot their products fast enough to make the holiday shopping season. If they used the usual linear process and supply chain states Amarasiriwardena, "It would be a year before we reacted to the market."

They needed to change the inventory they already had on hand.

Take the couple million dollars worth of slacks they had in inventory. Amarasiriwardena and the Ministry of Supply team thought, "could we change the fit?"

Customer research highlighted the fact that work from home professionals were not tucking in their shirts, "so they don't care about their belts." The new design incorporated a drawstring waistband.

Sneakers had also replaced dress shoes. "With sneakers," Amarasiriwardena notes, "you typically want a bit shorter length and a more tailored fit." So the new design altered the cut of the leg accordingly.

Then, he says, "we pulled our inventory from a site in Massachusetts and sent it to a factory in New Jersey," to effectively be retrofitted. "And suddenly we made a very relevant product just through those two changes."

The inventiveness of the Ministry of Supply team was accelerated by Scrum. The alterations took just 10 days to complete.

"I think it would have taken a traditional apparel company 12 to 18 months to see a change in the market then design, develop, and produce s product then have it on the shelves."

Full Product Pivot 12 Times Faster Than Industry Norm

The next step was to test market response to their new joggers. They sold well. So, other products went through similar redesigns and alterations.

With all but one of their physical locations closed due to COVID restriction (their Boston storefront was operating but under strict rules), online sales were critical for Ministry of Supply.

All 200 items on their website had to be reshot and remarketed to match their new brand pivot.

Time, again, was short. Amarasiriwardena says the visual rebranding was completed in two weeks. "October 13th was a day all of us remember," he says, "we had a national TV ad going out. Everything needed to be done for the launch." They made that date.

Overall, it took Ministry of Supply just 45 days to pivot their products and their entire brand. Industry norms for such a dramatic change are around 18 months. Scrum helped this organization respond faster than others thought possible. As one retail analyst told the New York Times,

> *"I'm most impressed that they're still around," adding, "That's an accomplishment in an era where literally the demand for your product has evaporated."*

Boosting Productivity By Cutting Time Spent In Meetings By 50%

Unlike other frameworks, Scrum and Scrum@Scale are not overly prescriptive. This allows for customized adaptations that improve outcomes for both teams and the organization as a whole.

Just such a customization greatly increased productivity at Ministry of Supply.

"One of our team members said everyone was experiencing Zoom fatigue," remembers Amarasiriwardena, "we were just having so many meetings trying to replicate our office environment."

So leadership decided to try to incorporate the concept of 'Maker/Manager' workweeks within their two-week Sprints. One week is designated as a 'Manager

Week'. All meetings and Scrum Events are contained in this week. The other week in a "Maker Week'. It's all about getting backlog done. The only exception is the 15-minute Daily Scrum, which takes place every workday throughout the Sprint.

As Amarasiriwardena describes in this [Fast Company profile](#) before this innovation "the average Ministry of Supply team member had 31.5 meetings per week. One year later, we cut that number almost in half to 17.6."

The Future Of Scrum At Ministry Of Supply

Sally Schultz is the Scrum Master at Ministry of Supply. After attending a Scrum Inc. training course in June 2020, she has been a driving force behind the implementation according to Amarasiriwardena.

Schultz says she emerged into Scrum, a tactic she has used to improve and spread the implementation at Ministry of Supply. "We had a couple of lunch-and-learns and high-level takeaways," she says, "and that's when we decided to try this. See if it helps as an organization."

Since those early days, Scrum and Scrum@Scale have taken hold.

Working in short cadences the Ministry of Supply team has room to iterate and continually improve both product and process while adapting to changing market conditions as they surface.

Schultz is pleased to see "how we've evolved as a team and how we've really grown in terms of efficiency. We've cut down our meetings and are driving business value."

Scrum, she says, has helped Ministry of Supply deliver tangible outputs and success. The highlight to her however is, "how the team has rallied around it."

Working well and achieving in a crisis is always laudable. But working in a way that allows you to adapt to complex situations before they become a crisis is one way to measure true business Agility.

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