

How Durham's Spoonflower Managed A Boom During the Pandemic

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Michael Jones was on the job for less than 90 days as Spoonflower's new CEO before COVID-19 caused shutdowns all across the country.

While businesses around the world faced severe economic challenges, the Durham company had the opposite problem: demand for their custom fabrics, home decor, and wallpapers had surged—almost overnight.

A Positive Outlook For 2020

Since opening its doors, Spoonflower has grown steadily. The company started in Durham as a fabric-by-the-yard business in 2009. Since then, it has expanded into wallpaper and home decor and opened a second operations hub in Berlin, Germany.



Image courtesy of Spoonflower.

In that sense, growth was already in the picture when Michael Jones began his tenure as CEO in January.

“The business was doing well,” he said. “We were growing and we were in the mid-30% year-on-year growth in March. Things were looking good, both in the US and internationally.”

That’s when things started to change.

“Then, the third week of March when COVID-19 hit the U.S. and they started canceling college basketball and NBA basketball and schools were getting let out, we started getting to the point where it was pretty crazy,” he said.

Spoonflower Sees A Surge

Initially, signs of how Spoonflower would be affected by the coronavirus weren’t clear.

“Our growth rate had dropped, although we were still growing,” said Jones.

But soon, the orders started rolling in.



Image courtesy of Spoonflower.

“Then, before you know it—call it a week or two after that—we just started seeing incredible growth across the board,” Jones said. “There was doubling in some cases and even tripling of the business. It was in all categories. It was fabric, it was home decor, and it was our wallpaper business as well.”

Even speaking about it months later, Jones still seems awestruck by the boom in business.

“It was one of the most amazing things I’ve ever been through,” he said. “I’ve never seen growth happen that fast in that short a period of time.”

What Created the Demand?

Without a doubt, some of Spoonflower’s boom was due to the new demand for facemasks. With mass-produced N95 masks and other surgical options hard to come by in the early days of the pandemic, many people turned to handsewn masks. Spoonflower’s selection of unique fabric designs were a perfect solution for people making them, even for some very notable people.

“Dr. Fauci wore a mask that was a Spoonflower design, which was essentially [an image of] the coronavirus itself that someone had uploaded,” Jones said. “Then someone made him a mask.”

However, Jones says that masks aren’t the only factor in the increase in demand. He also believes that that increase might not be a boom, but more of a permanent shift.



Image courtesy of Spoonflower.

“What’s even more interesting to me is that as COVID has become more of a “normal” part of our life at the moment, we’ve continued to see incredible strong growth ever since,” he said. “I don’t believe it’s changing any time soon. I think the acceleration of people buying things online is one. Also, I think the acceleration of DIY projects is another. I think the resurgence of this maker community of people making goods and selling them on their own site, or their small shop, or etsy is continuing to grow.”

How Spoonflower Managed The Boom

While it might sound like any company’s dream to double or triple its business in such a short amount of time, the surge presented its own challenges.

“We had to move fast,” said Jones. “In less than 30 days we had to remove all office workers from our Berlin office as well as our Durham facility. We had to triple the number of printers that we had. Our printers are not exactly HP printers that you buy from Amazon. We had to get them air-freighted in.”

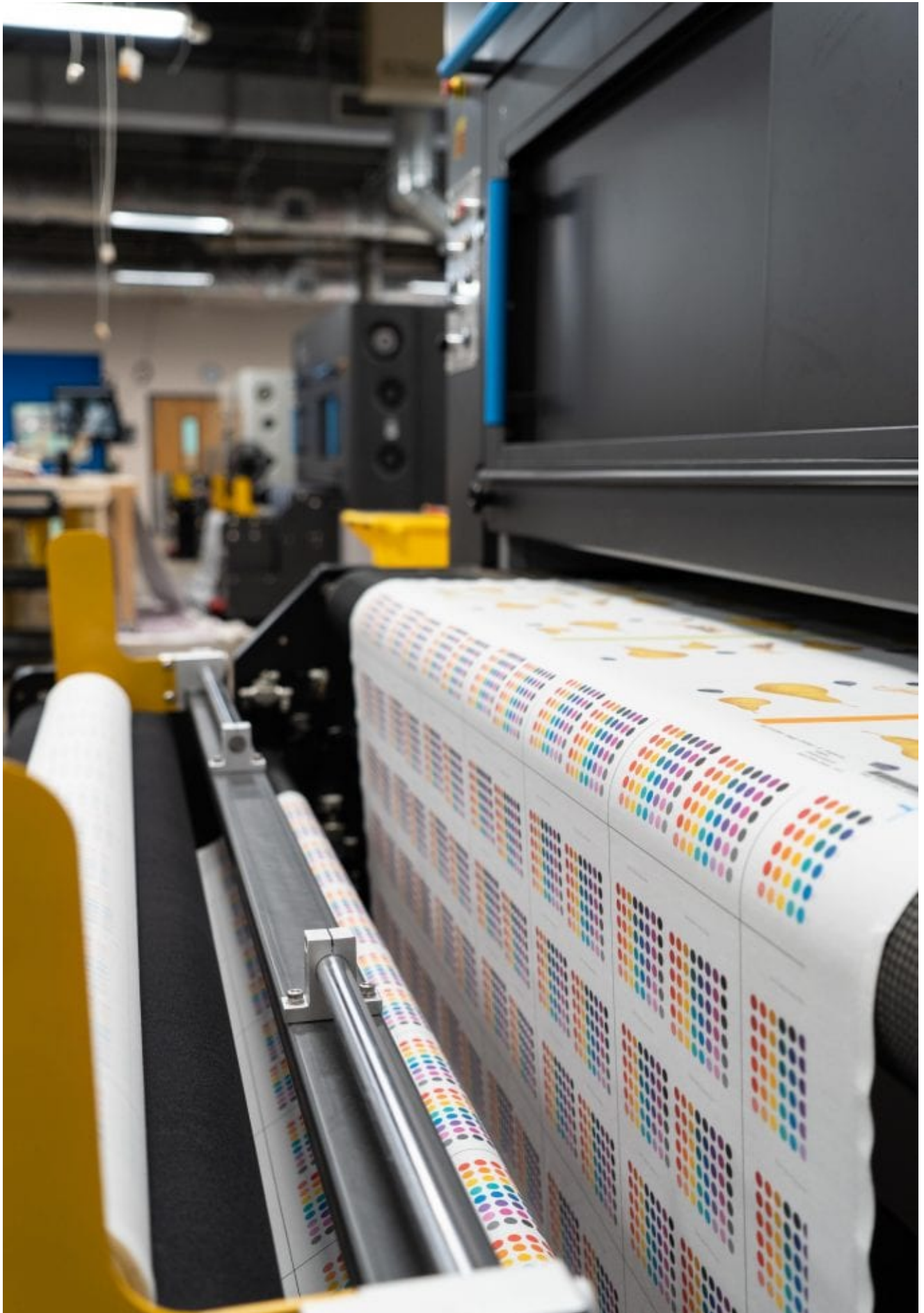




Image courtesy of Spoonflower

In addition to production equipment, Spoonflower had to hire more people to run it.

“We have been on a really big hiring frenzy, especially in our operations group,” said Jones. “I think we’ve added close to a hundred people now. Also in customer service as well.”

The company also had to make changes to its physical footprint to accommodate more equipment, more supplies, and more orders.

“We had to convert our office space into fulfillment space and took the fulfillment space in the factory and expanded the factory,” Jones said. “We doubled the size of the factory in Durham.”

People Coming Together

Jones says that the company’s place in the community played a big role in the surge in business and its ability to manage it.

“The company’s been around for about 11 years and has done a really good job of organically building a very very strong community,” said Jones. “When we started really getting hit hard and were behind on fulfilling orders, we did some videos and some outreach to our customers. Overwhelmingly, people were more supportive than they were critical. They were understanding it was rough to operate in an environment like this.”



image courtesy of Spoonflower

In addition, Jones credits Spoonflower’s enormous global community of artists and their creativity for much of the company’s success during the pandemic.

“We have this artist community of about 30,000 artists across the world,” said Jones. “They now have 1.8 million designs on our site and they increase on a daily basis. So, from the depth and breadth of designs, it’s almost impossible to not find a design that you’re looking for.”

Jones also credits Spoonflower’s employees with being able to manage the rapid changes.

“We have a really good product procurement team,” he said. “During this entire pandemic they have done an absolutely amazing job of making sure that we were not gapping on any fabric.”

Finally, Jones cites Spoonflower’s employee culture and the connectivity between its employees and the city it calls home as a major part of its success.

“We are a really different, eclectic group of people and we care a lot about not only each other and our customers, but the city of Durham. It’s a really important part of who we are.”

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Emily Orr, a North Carolina teen entrepreneur, built an impressive hand-lettering and digital art business, Blue Strawberry Studios. How?