



Q&A

Seattle Goodwill deals with the 'great American cleanout'

How the nonprofit is addressing disruption in donations and increased demand for services during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected every industry, organization and person, but [nonprofits](#) are among the hardest hit, as demand for their services has grown. For Seattle Goodwill, the pandemic has also resulted in disruption in the donation of items for its thrift store business.

Avanade, which worked with the organization to help it build a modern Microsoft Dynamics-based technology platform, spoke with Mai Nguyen, Chief Operating Officer, and Derieontay Sparks, Vice President, Retail Operations for Seattle Goodwill, about how they're addressing the current challenges. (For more on Seattle Goodwill's new tech platform, see accompanying [case study](#).)



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– Mai Nguyen, Chief Operating Officer, Seattle Goodwill

Q: How has the pandemic affected the demand for Seattle Goodwill’s services?

A: Sparks: Seattle Goodwill’s business hasn’t slowed down during the pandemic, even with the stores being closed during the lockdown. We’ve seen more demand for our mission services and a high volume of donations. It’s not just our job training and education services where we’ve seen higher demand. It’s also what we call “wraparound services” – these are things we provide to help people get their basic needs met, like food and health care, so they can come to class ready to learn. For many in our student community, it’s a tough time for them and they’re struggling to pay rent and utilities, so Seattle Goodwill is helping to support them in that way as well.

Nguyen: The digital divide or digital inequity has become very clear during the pandemic. The demand for things like mobile devices and internet access has increased since classes are now online. Many of our students don’t have the necessary technology, so we’ve helped them get things like refurbished laptops and tablets with Wi-Fi connectivity.

Q: How has the pandemic affected your retail business?

A: Nguyen: The normal flow of goods from our donation centers to our thrift stores has been completely disrupted due to the pandemic. Our two warehouses were completely full, so we had to lease a third one to accommodate the back-up due to the lower volume of in-store sales.

Sparks: I call it the “great American cleanout.” With everyone at home during the pandemic, they’re cleaning out their closets and we’ve seen an amazing amount of donations as a result.

Q: How is technology helping you address both the disruption in donations and increased demand for services?

A: Nguyen: The new Production Suite [donation inventory intake tool] has been critical in helping us handle the increase in donated items and to do it more quickly. It had previously been a manual process with a lot of touchpoints – sorting, scanning, tagging, pricing. Now it’s automated, which makes the process more efficient and gets items to the stores faster.

As the demand for mission services grows, we’re looking at some of our infrastructure needs so that we can reach more people. One solution we’re exploring is a mobile bus with Wi-Fi connectivity. It would enable us to get out to some of the more remote areas, which are often underserved in normal times but are even more isolated due to the pandemic. We’re also looking at things like moving to online registration for classes and improving our e-commerce customer experience, especially since not everyone is comfortable coming into the stores.

Sparks: We’re building our technology stack to focus not only on our e-commerce site but also on allowing our thrift customers to buy online and pick up in the store. We have identified online selling as a growth engine, and we need to explore a number of options to position us better in case the stores had to close again.

About Seattle Goodwill

Seattle Goodwill is a nonprofit organization founded in 1923. We currently operate [five Job Training Centers](#), [24 retail stores](#) and over [40 donation sites](#) in King, Snohomish, Skagit, Whatcom and Kitsap County. We employ over 1,500 people in our region.



About Avanade

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