**Stanford eCorner**

**Pandemic Product Innovation**

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Nextdoor CEO Sarah Friar describes how the company responded to a surge of users driven by the COVID-19 pandemic. The first challenge, she recalls, was technical: Simply keeping the digital infrastructure working. They soon explored ways to leverage the platform's credibility with public agencies and share accurate, up-to-date information about the pandemic with users. And finally, they explored how to connect users with each other and with local businesses and nonprofits that desperately need support — which involved careful product innovation as much as good intentions.

## Transcript

- The first thing we saw was a big surge 00:00:06,060 in members coming onto the platform, and that actually began in Italy, that country that I mentioned earlier. We could see it come through Italy, France, to the UK. We knew it was coming to the US, and then actually Australia. I remember having long conversations with my country manager in Australia who kept saying, "We're an island, this is really not gonna impact us." And then of course, it did, and now it's actually circling the globe in these surges. So, number one was just this huge rise in usage, almost 80% lift in our daily active users from February going into March. And so, for the entrepreneur engineers out there, on the one hand for the business person, you're like, "Yay!" And then if you're in the backend, you are in a "Holy shh" moment. I'm sorry, I probably shouldn't say that on screen, but where your engineers are literally working day and night. Because of course we all say we're building platforms that naturally scale, but the reality is you don't expect that sort of just growth to happen overnight. And it certainly really starts to show where some of the cracks in the system might exist. We're lucky we're a relatively modern platform, so we're built on an extensible architecture like AWS, but nevertheless, there were lots of things that we had to really make sure stayed up.

The next big thing for us was thinking about mis and disinformation. We'd actually been in preparation mode for the US election and we'd come out of Brexit in the UK, so we had done work to really think about, how do we make sure Nextdoor is the place you come to for the most credible real-time sources of information? And so, that was step two, is how do we keep our neighbors safe? Because even when people are being neighborly, sometimes they don't even realize they're propagating misinformation. It sounds like a neighborly thing to say to someone, "Hey, did you know if you take extra iron tablets, "you're immune," right? Whatever thing the internet has thought up that week. And so, we really quickly had to make sure that wasn't happening. And luckily, we had a lot of credibility with public agencies, right? Nextdoor works with folks like FEMA when hurricanes are hitting the United States. We've been working with the UK government, we've been working with the French Ministry of Health. And so, really quickly, we were able to bring folks to the platform like Governor Newsom, Governor Cuomo, Governor Raimondo in Rhode Island, Mayor Khan in London, who wanted to know that Nextdoor could be the place to put their latest and greatest information. So, that was step two, make sure accurate information is right there, front and center. The next thing we saw was this rise of help to give. It's a very natural human reaction that, in a disaster, it's actually one of the things I love about humanity, is that when we are at our most base moment, like, I don't know, you're in the storm and someone's being swept away.

You don't think, what political party are they in? What color are they? What race, or what gender? You just stick out your hand and help pull them in out of that stream. And that was, and also, I think particularly with COVID, who knows how to react to a global pandemic? People wanted some personal agency, like a feeling of control. And so, the way to get some personal agency was, of course, to say, "How can I help?" So, we saw a lot of, "How can I help?" We weren't seeing the other side, which is people saying, "I need help." And that takes a bit longer 'cause it's actually a very vulnerable moment for a lot of people to say, "I need help." And so we had to think through product, and we can talk about some of the product innovation we did, but things like our Global Help Map or our Global Help Groups as a way to lower the barrier to someone being able to say, "I actually need some help at the moment." You know, personally in my neighborhood, I connected to two people. And it's interesting, 'cause both are in about that kind of 50, 60 age group. They spent an inordinate amount of time the first time I talked to both of them explaining why they didn't really need help. You know, "I'm super fit, healthy, "I normally run, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And it was really their way of saying, "I don't normally need help." But in both cases, they needed

me to go to the pharmacy for them 'cause they were immunosuppressed and couldn't leave their house. And I think that was a unique feeling for a lot of people. And usually you depend on family or friends, but suddenly that wasn't available to you, right? My family lives in Northern Ireland. I have older parents. I wanna make sure they're getting everything, but I'm actually leaning on my neighbors there to make sure that my parents have what they need currently.

And then, finally, the I would say more recent areas we've focused on have been local businesses and local nonprofits because these are incredibly important parts of a neighborhood. Our local economies will never be the same if we let our local coffee shop, our local dry cleaner, our local hair salon go out of business, and yet that's what's happening. And so, we're trying to connect both neighbors who would like to help. And we saw, initially, things like GoFundMe campaigns. But in reality, businesses are both very proud, they don't wanna accept charity, but they also need to be sustainable, right? GoFundMe will only take you so far. And so, as they've pivoted their business models, we're trying to help them get that message out. So, making sure for holiday shopping, you know that your favorite local business is now online, or, I just saw a restaurant that was struggling. And so, she has become the queen of, she now parcels and sends, oh, my God, I'm forgetting the name of them right now, but little wontons all around the US. She actually ran a Chinese restaurant, but has pivoted to being this distributor of this particular type of food, and that's how she's, she's actually getting better in her business than she was when she was a restaurant. So, how do we help neighbors find out what their businesses are doing and how do we help businesses' need to really let neighbors know what they're doing and where neighbors can help most?..