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Guest Viewpoint

Guest commentary: Elected officials must do right by small business

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My small party rental business is alive, barely. Covid-19 decimated us with postponements or cancellations of graduations, weddings and birthday parties since early March.

In spite of all the lockdowns and damage to our economy, I remain hopeful about the future. We finally received PPP funding to pay our workers. People are using my company to host smaller events that respect social distancing, and my creditors are giving us a break. I see a light at the end of the tunnel.

But members of Congress are intent on turning off the lights for good. They just held a hearing where they attacked big tech companies like Alphabet Inc.-owned Google and Facebook that serve as our lifeline. They believe that because big tech is big, somehow it's bad for everyone. That's not true for my small business, and it infuriates me that Congress is willing to sacrifice the futures of countless small businesses just to score political points.

My Palo Alto-based company rents out party equipment like helium tanks, popcorn and cotton candy machines, even tables and chairs. It's a very specific business. We have lots of competition, which means we must be able to offer competitive



GRAEME JENNINGS/POOL VIA THE NEW YORK TIMES
Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testifies via videoconference before a hearing of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on antitrust, in Washington, on July 29. Tech executives were pressed on anticompetitive behavior during the hearing.

prices. A dip in the economy can make a huge difference in how many events we work and how much we earn annually.

Luckily, Google Ads help us cut down on costs. When my wife and I first opened our doors, we advertised in the Yellow Pages, but it was expensive and eating away at our profits. It wasn't sustainable. Google Ads are cheaper and increased sales by 900%. Today, we rely on smart and engaging digital advertising that attracts customers to our services. Without the digital safety net, we wouldn't have a business to save.

It's not right for politicians to use this moment to attack the companies that help businesses like mine. After everything we've been through, if companies like Google or Facebook are broken up, it would be a punch in the gut to every small business owner that's fighting to stay afloat. If I have to go back to the Yellow Pages and other traditional forms of advertising right now, it would be devastating.

I came here from Mexico. Through hard work and persistence, my wife and I have built a wonderful life. We have a beautiful family, a small home and a company that allows us to be a part of our customers' happy events. As immigrants, we took our shot as entrepreneurs and got a little lucky. Still, it would never have happened for us — and I'm sure for thousands or perhaps millions of other small businesses — without digital platforms.

Regardless of what happens, we will keep working hard. We're going to adapt to this new normal and restructure our business to account for social distancing and tighter budgets. All we're asking for is a little help from the elected officials who make the important decisions that affect whether we succeed or fail. I don't know if they recognize how many small businesses like mine are built on top of digital platforms, and the importance of consumer reviews that help validate small businesses.

If new laws or lawsuits targeting Big Tech make my digital advertising prices go up, make my ads less effective or mean that every customer review will have to be checked out by a lawyer before it is posted, my business and many more small businesses will suffer. I believe in commonsense regulations, but we must be smart about it.

With Covid-19 having driven countless people out of business already, this would be the worst time for politicians to bring down the digital platforms that are offering us a lifeline now and in the future.

Feliciano Zavala is the president of Peninsula Party Rentals in Palo Alto and is a member of the Connected Commerce Council, a membership group for digitally empowered small businesses.