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Businesses Struggle to Navigate the COVID-19 Storm

INTRODUCTION

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Businesses Struggle to Navigate the COVID-19 Storm

BY MARK ZANDI AND JIM SWIFT

The COVID-19 crisis hit American businesses hard in April. Business-to-business spending fell sharply during the month, and businesses are increasingly late paying their bills. Some are so far behind, prospects are rising that there will soon be a significant increase in business failures and bankruptcies.

Businesses in nearly every industry are under financial stress, but especially in the travel and entertainment industries and in parts of retail and healthcare. Businesses of all sizes are suffering with weaker sales, although spending is down most sharply for smaller businesses. In all regions of the country businesses are feeling the fallout—but most notably in states dependent on the energy, vehicle and travel industries.

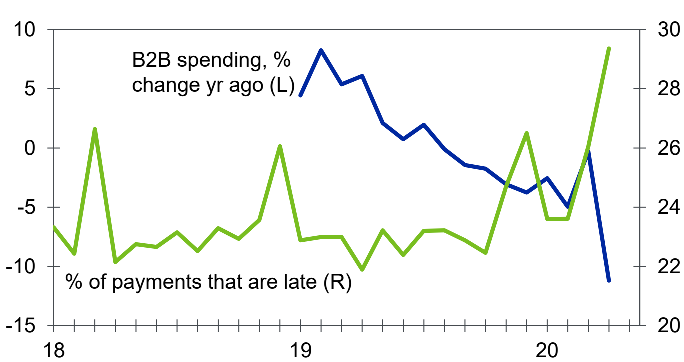
These observations are based on business-to-business spending data provided by Cortera, which collects the information from the accounts receivable systems of businesses responsible for approximately $1.5 trillion of the $8 trillion in annual B2B spending. Cortera uses the data to provide businesses with information about the credit of firms they are selling to, so they can assess the risks of not getting paid in a timely way. The data are based on tracking the spending and payment behavior of the same companies on a monthly basis from the start of 2018.

B2B spending slides

Overall business-to-business spending slid by 11% in April compared with a year ago (see Chart 1). B2B spending is a good proxy for total business revenues, and this double-digit decline is on par with the peak-to-trough decline in business revenues during the Great Recession. It is notable that B2B spending growth began weakening in the second half of last year, well before the virus struck, likely due in significant part to the fallout from the tariff war between the U.S. and China.

It is stunning that industries accounting for more than one-fourth of total employment prior to the COVID-19 crisis slashed their B2B purchases by more than one-third over the past year. Hotels cut the most, as travel came to a standstill, followed closely by the entertainment industry, including the performing arts, spectator sports, movies, museums, gaming and amusement parks (see Table 1). The collapse in vehicle sales is evident in B2B spending by transportation equipment manufacturers, and the curtailment of elective procedures caused hospitals to rein in their spending. Restaurants, airlines, gasoline stations, educational services firms, and the construction industry also cut way back.

Chart 1: Businesses Under Financial Stress



Sources: Cortera, Moody's Analytics

Few businesses meaningfully increased their spending in April, but with big parts of the nation sheltering in place, the postal service, online retailers and wholesale distributers were busy and therefore were purchasing more to get deliveries to people's homes. Food, health and personal care, and electronics and apparel stores also upped their purchases to meet the demand from Americans living and working from home. Staying at home also meant greater demand for the entertainment services delivered by the broadcasting, publishing and data processing industries, which increased their purchases.

There may have been a few tentative green shoots in April. Spending by private households, including spending on gardeners, caretakers and maintenance workers, picked up in April, although it was still down on a year-over-year basis. Spending by the telecommunications industry and water transportation industry, which includes cargo ships, was also up in the month but still down year over year.

Falling further behind

Businesses also fell well behind on their bills in April. Over 29% of B2B payments were late in the month, up from a typical 22% a year prior. The hotel, movie, performing arts and restaurant industries

Table 1: Business-to-Business Spending

Top 10 weakest and strongest industries, Apr 2020

NAIC	Industry	Employment 2019, ths	% change yr ago	B2B spending % change mo ago
711	Performing Arts; Spectator Sports; and Related Industries	516.7	-63.1	-58.8
721	Accommodation	2,077.4	-62.2	-43.6
512	Motion Picture and Sound Recording Industries	442.8	-61.1	-32.2
336	Transportation Equipment Manufacturing	1,734.0	-60.9	-42.7
448	Clothing and Clothing Accessories Stores	1,299.2	-59.5	-45.2
712	Museums; Historical Sites; and Similar Institutions	173.0	-54.9	-38.3
213	Support Activities for Mining	343.1	-53.1	-29.8
713	Amusement; Gambling; and Recreation Industries	1,745.3	-44.6	-30.3
622	Hospitals	5,198.2	-41.0	-38.6
451	Sporting Goods; Hobby; Musical Instrument; and Book Stores	550.0	-40.1	-31.6
	All Industries	150,935.4	-11.2	-9.73
511	Publishing Industries (except Internet)	759.6	7.0	-45.4
518	Data Processing; Hosting; and Related Services	339.2	11.6	30.8
445	Food and Beverage Stores	3077.8	12.9	-2.7
623	Nursing and Residential Care Facilities	3378.6	15.9	4.7
446	Health and Personal Care Stores	1052.4	16.9	14.4
423	Merchant Wholesalers; Durable Goods	3203.8	19.2	-4.3
443	Electronics and Appliance Stores	477.3	32.4	-7.1
515	Broadcasting (except Internet)	266.4	38.9	5.9
454	Nonstore Retailers	562.7	41.2	-9.7
491	Postal Service	669.0	80.8	-15.7

Note: Excludes NAICs with fewer than 25,000 employees in 2019 and in public administration and agriculture.

Sources: Cortera, Moody's Analytics

appear close to a financial breaking point; they are late on about half of their bills (see Table 2). These industries accounted for approximately one-tenth of all jobs prior to the COVID-19 crisis.

Other industries teetering on the financial edge include clothing retailers and apparel manufacturers. Big retailers J.C. Penney, Neiman Marcus and J. Crew have already filed for bankruptcy, but hundreds of thousands of small mom and pop brick-and-mortar retailers have already or soon will close their doors forever. These businesses were already struggling before the virus due to formidable online competition, and the Paycheck Protection Program—the federal government's effort to provide financial support to small businesses across all industries—appears to be falling well short.

Also indicative of the mounting financial stress on businesses is the increasing number of days they are behind in making their payments. The average days beyond terms—calculated based on late balances dollar-weighted across aging buckets of 1-30 days, 31-60 days, 61-90 days and 91+ days late—increased to nearly 13 days in April. This is up from closer to nine days in April last year. The airline and rail industries are over 18 days late paying their bills, among the highest across all industries (see Table 3). The airlines have received a $25 billion bailout, including grants and loans, from the federal government, but that likely will not be enough to save all of the airline companies.

Perhaps most telling is that no three-digit NAICS industry has become more timely in making its payments compared to a year ago. The best payers include nursing care facilities, couriers, building and garden supply retailers, banks, and insurance carriers.

Big and small suffer

B2B spending and payment behavior does not suggest there are big differences in the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on companies of different sizes. B2B spending in April weakened a bit more for companies with fewer than 500 employees, declining 13% from a year ago, compared to companies with 500 or more employees, which were down closer to 10%.

However, the bigger the company, the more tardy they were paying their bills and the greater the increase in their tardiness over the past year. Companies with fewer than 500 employees paid nearly 30% of their B2B bills late in April, up over 8 percentage points from a year before. Companies with 500 or more employees paid 36% of their bills late, up more than 11 percentage points from a year prior. This more likely reflects the market power large companies have to delay payments without incurring a late charge or losing business, than that larger companies are under more financial stress than smaller ones.

There are some meaningful differences in B2B spending and payment behavior by company size when looking across three-digit NAICS industries. Broadly speaking, it appears that large companies are doing much better than small companies in industries that are faring relatively well in the crisis such as the general merchandise and food manufacturing industries (see Chart 2). However, large companies are suffering more than small companies in industries that are getting

Table 2: Percent of Business-to-Business Payments Late

Top 10 weakest and strongest 3-digit NAICS industries, Apr 2020

NAIC	Industry	Employment 2019, ths	% late	B2B spending Change yr ago, ppts
721	Accommodation	2,077.4	69.0	44.5
512	Motion Picture and Sound Recording Industries	442.8	54.0	32.8
711	Performing Arts; Spectator Sports; and Related Industries	516.7	49.2	24.1
722	Food Services and Drinking Places	12,068.7	47.6	22.7
712	Museums; Historical Sites; and Similar Institutions	173.0	46.4	24.1
448	Clothing and Clothing Accessories Stores	1,299.2	45.3	19.1
315	Apparel Manufacturing	110.4	44.7	18.0
323	Printing and Related Support Activities	424.7	38.8	9.5
482	Rail Transportation	174.5	38.2	2.3
481	Air Transportation	503.3	37.6	9.6
	Total	150,935.4	29.4	7.5
454	Nonstore Retailers	562.7	26.0	8.2
522	Credit Intermediation and Related Activities	2,651.2	25.9	6.2
425	Wholesale Electronic Markets and Agents and Brokers	530.9	25.8	3.7
452	General Merchandise Stores	3,037.8	24.1	5.2
321	Wood Product Manufacturing	409.0	23.4	2.0
811	Repair and Maintenance	1,352.2	22.1	3.6
444	Building Material and Garden Equipment and Supplies Dealers	1,296.4	20.7	2.3
524	Insurance Carriers and Related Activities	2,790.1	20.6	4.0
623	Nursing and Residential Care Facilities	3,378.6	20.1	1.9
441	Motor Vehicle and Parts Dealers	2,034.9	18.9	4.5

Note: Excludes NAICs with fewer than 25,000 employees in 2019 and in public administration and agriculture.

Sources: Cortera, Moody's Analytics

Table 3: Business-to-Business Payments Days Late

Top 10 weakest and strongest industries, Apr 2020

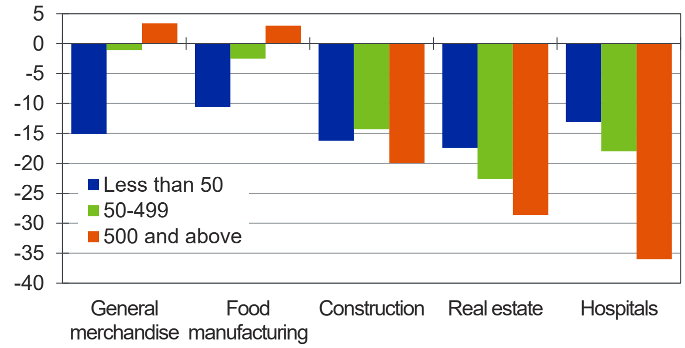
NAIC	Industry	Employment 2019, ths	# days late	B2B spending Change yr ago
721	Accommodation	2,077.4	27.6	16.8
722	Food Services and Drinking Places	12,068.7	23.2	10.7
711	Performing Arts; Spectator Sports; and Related Industries	516.7	21.9	11.1
512	Motion Picture and Sound Recording Industries	442.8	19.1	11.4
482	Rail Transportation	174.5	18.9	1.3
712	Museums; Historical Sites; and Similar Institutions	173.0	18.2	9.8
481	Air Transportation	503.3	18.1	5.8
448	Clothing and Clothing Accessories Stores	1,299.2	17.8	8.4
622	Hospitals	5,198.2	17.8	3.2
488	Support Activities for Transportation	1,299.2	16.4	3.3
	Total	150,935.4	12.7	3.5
454	Nonstore Retailers	562.7	9.7	2.9
337	Furniture and Related Product Manufacturing	387.8	9.6	1.5
524	Insurance Carriers and Related Activities	2,790.1	9.6	1.6
322	Paper Manufacturing	365.4	9.5	1.8
333	Machinery Manufacturing	1,126.2	9.5	1.9
326	Plastics and Rubber Products Manufacturing	737.0	9.5	1.9
332	Fabricated Metal Product Manufacturing	1,491.3	9.0	1.6
321	Wood Product Manufacturing	409.0	9.0	0.9
441	Motor Vehicle and Parts Dealers	2,034.9	8.6	2.2
444	Building Material and Garden Equipment and Supplies Dealers	1,296.4	8.2	0.9

Note: Excludes NAICs with fewer than 25,000 employees in 2019 and in public administration and agriculture.

Sources: Cortera, Moody's Analytics

Chart 2: Large Firm Fortunes Swing More

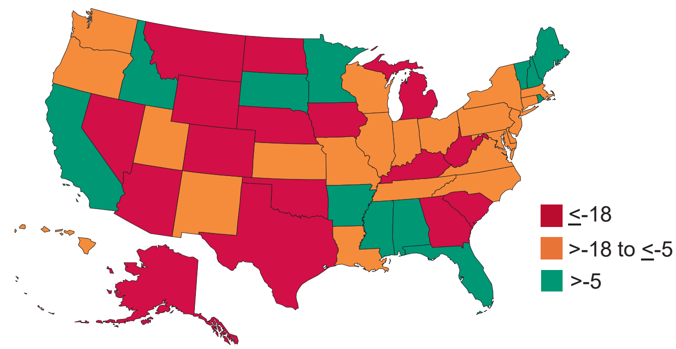
B2B spending by company size, % change yr ago



Sources: Cortera, Moody's Analytics

Chart 3: B2B Spending Takes a Hit

B2B spending through Apr 2020, % change yr ago



Sources: Cortera, Moody's Analytics

hit harder such as real estate and hospitals. Large and small companies are suffering roughly equally in industries that are doing poorly or not particularly well. It is unclear what is behind this. Perhaps large companies have more capacity than small companies and thus can meet stronger demand more readily, but this also makes them more vulnerable when demand falls off.

COVID-19 impacts states

The COVID-19 crisis is resulting in considerable differences in B2B spending and payment behavior across regions of the country. B2B spending was down by more than 30% in April compared with a year ago in five states: Michigan, Alaska, Wyoming, Oklahoma and West Virginia (see Chart 3). The collapse in vehicle production is behind Michigan's poor performance, and the free fall in the fossil fuel industry is driving developments in the other four states.

South Carolina and Georgia also suffered outsize declines in B2B spending in the month, consistent with problems in the vehicle industry, while weak B2B sales in Texas and North Dakota are consistent with the problems in the energy industry. States with large tourist- and travel-related industries such as Nevada and Colorado also got hit hard.

Companies from the broad New York City area to Boston are also struggling with the ill effects of the virus crisis. More than 40% of B2B payments by New York state companies were late in April, the highest in the country. New Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode Island and Massachusetts companies were not too far behind.

Businesses in California, another state plagued by the virus and stiff shelter-in-place regulations, saw only modest declines in B2B spending, but they fell significantly behind on B2B payments. Florida businesses actually enjoyed an increase in B2B spending due to a surge in spending by food and electronics stores, but also fell significantly behind on their payments.

We will continue to monitor the Cortera B2B spending and payment data to determine when the end of the severe downturn is at hand. No sign of that yet.

About the Authors

Mark Zandi is chief economist of Moody's Analytics, where he directs economic research. Moody's Analytics, a subsidiary of Moody's Corp., is a leading provider of economic research, data and analytical tools. Dr. Zandi is a cofounder of Economy.com, which Moody's purchased in 2005.

Dr. Zandi's broad research interests encompass macroeconomics, financial markets and public policy. His recent research has focused on mortgage finance reform and the determinants of mortgage foreclosure and personal bankruptcy. He has analyzed the economic impact of various tax and government spending policies and assessed the appropriate monetary policy response to bubbles in asset markets.

A trusted adviser to policymakers and an influential source of economic analysis for businesses, journalists and the public, Dr. Zandi frequently testifies before Congress on topics including the economic outlook, the nation's daunting fiscal challenges, the merits of fiscal stimulus, financial regulatory reform, and foreclosure mitigation.

Dr. Zandi conducts regular briefings on the economy for corporate boards, trade associations and policymakers at all levels. He is on the board of directors of MGIC, the nation's largest private mortgage insurance company, and The Reinvestment Fund, a large CDFI that makes investments in disadvantaged neighborhoods. He is often quoted in national and global publications and interviewed by major news media outlets, and is a frequent guest on CNBC, NPR, Meet the Press, CNN, and various other national networks and news programs.

Dr. Zandi is the author of *Paying the Price: Ending the Great Recession and Beginning a New American Century*, which provides an assessment of the monetary and fiscal policy response to the Great Recession. His other book, *Financial Shock: A 360º Look at the Subprime Mortgage Implosion, and How to Avoid the Next Financial Crisis*, is described by The New York Times as the "clearest guide" to the financial crisis.

Dr. Zandi earned his BS from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and his PhD at the University of Pennsylvania. He lives with his wife and three children in the suburbs of Philadelphia.

Jim Swift is the president and chief executive officer of Cortera, a leading provider of data and analytics regarding the financial health of businesses that drive the North American economy.

Because the vitality of commercial credit is essential to economic health, Cortera's insights are invaluable to the entire credit ecosystem—lenders, borrowers, banks, insurance companies, financial analysts, economists and governments. Cortera's community-enabled information comprises more than $1.5 trillion of annual economic interactions among businesses. Cortera's clients use the data to help them make up their minds about the financial health of businesses and markets, thus enabling a new era of Decisionomics™.

Jim has spent his career in a series of data and analytics endeavors. Prior to founding Cortera, Jim was the chief operating officer of LexisNexis Risk Management, a unit of RELX that provides data solutions for customers in banking, insurance, law enforcement and other markets.

He joined LexisNexis through its acquisition of Seisint, where Jim's role on the startup's senior leadership team encompassed data, product, revenue generation and other responsibilities. Seisint's innovations in massively parallel data processing enabled breakthrough analytics products for fraud detection, credit decisioning and other data-intensive applications.

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