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RESTORING RETAIL CONFIDENCE: STRATEGIES FORWARD-LOOKING BRANDS SHOULD CONSIDER NOW

[Barrie Scardina](#) • 4/10/2020



Without a doubt, our world will be forever changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. We continue to be inspired each day by the innovators and philanthropists in the retail community who are rising up to make a difference; the manufacturers pivoting to make masks and gowns, restaurants opening to feed first responders and families in need, and brands creating content to bring joy during a dark time.

In this moment, it is also critical that retailers begin to look forward and strategize how they will re-engage their customers when this virus is contained. They will be able to reference the experience in other countries and nuance their learnings for their environment. As retailers develop plans to reopen, re-engaging the consumer is going to be more complex, involving new safety and health standards, and developing a greater sense of mutual trust. Brands should begin to build communications and operational plans now so they are positioned for success when they can reopen doors.

To be prepared for the new “post COVID-19” world, retailers should begin to consider:

- **Addressing the Store Environment:** Retailers will need to review every aspect of the store environment from its size to fixture spacing to ventilation and temperature control. A safe shopping experience means no more tight aisles, repositioning of high traffic areas and developing strategies to adjust for the number of customers in a store at one time. Big box stores and grocers are already managing people per-square-foot capacities, but the challenge will be returning to normal levels of dollars per-square-foot productivity while balancing the safety of customers. Operational plans for curb-side pick-up, BOPIS, and shipping from local stores will need to be successfully implemented to help drive top-line sales.
- **Integrating and Implementing Technology:** Understanding how to provide a “touchless” environment in order to mitigate the spread of germs is going to be paramount. Touchless technology will need to be integrated into the store experience and check-out process. Artificial intelligence and virtual reality will help consumers see themselves in everything from clothing to eyeshadow and lipstick. Nordstrom is among one of the earlier adopters of consumer-facing technology driving business through omni-channel efforts and [customer-integrated technology](#) in the store environment to create a seamless customer experience. These investments will need to be thoughtfully integrated to augment and enhance a brand’s experience.
- **Utilizing Data and Analytics:** CRM, mobile, and industry data will be critical to understanding the consumer’s preparedness to return to stores, malls, gyms, and movie theaters. Utilizing this data, brands can engage consumers, listen to their concerns, and proactively address their needs. Data from third-party providers will give retailers advantages in the marketplace. This includes loyalty insights on products to drive inventory efficiency and margins, labor and operational statistics to reduce store costs, and portfolio optimization, store rationalization, and lease administration to ensure that a brand has the most productive physical store portfolio.

- **Communicating with Transparency and Authenticity:** Brands placing our communities first will be remembered long after this crisis for their authenticity, transparency, and philanthropy. Consumers value giving back -- supporting first responders, feeding those in need, and stepping forward to provide support, empathy, and hope during this challenging time. This ranges from [Anheuser-Busch pivoting their facilities to make hand sanitizer](#) to [Nike](#) and [Lululemon](#) hosting free online workouts to keep people fit and healthy. Consumers want to trust that brands have their best interests at heart and those that implement effective strategies will be rewarded with loyalty and sales.

It is certain that the world will forever be changed by this pandemic. It is also certain that retailers will re-strategize, re-engineer, and re-invigorate their business to meet new standards and expectations. Forward-thinking brands who start making these considerations now will be poised to win when consumers enter stores again. As our admired Fred Rogers said, "Often when you think you are at the end of something, you are at the beginning of something else".

This is the first installment in the series "Restoring Retail Confidence" to explore the impacts of COVID-19 on consumer behavior and how retailers can evolve to meet these new challenges.

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