

# Post-Pandemic Marketing Challenges and Strategies

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*The objective of this project is to identify major obstacles retail marketers faced since the COVID-19 pandemic, and which methods can be identified as the “future of marketing” for the post-pandemic environment. An in-depth analysis of retail brands, insightful surveys, and consumer trends has been conducted. From this method, four major challenges have been identified. First, a change in overall safety guidelines that force companies to comply with new health and safety standards, including limiting in store capacities, was inevitable. Second, unforeseen shifts in demand left manufacturing companies struggling to keep up. Third, a change in general industry standards has caused brands to do away with conventional retail theory. Lastly, the threat of e-commerce giants makes it difficult for small businesses to compete. Four key marketing strategies have been identified in order to adapt to the post- pandemic environment as well.*

*Keywords: artificial intelligence, digital marketing, empathetic marketing, sales agility*

## INTRODUCTION

For many brands, traditional marketing techniques have remained satisfactory for years. However, that may have held true until the events of 2020 brought to the world. In late 2019, a respiratory disease foreign to humans began to consume China. Amid the usual “cold and flu” season, Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was rapidly spreading across the globe. By March 2020, the world was faced with a global pandemic. By the end of 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that nearly two million people died from COVID-19-related complications worldwide (WHO, 2021). As devastating as this was to the general public, marketers had no choice but to reinvent their branding techniques.

This paper offers two key contributions to academia and practitioners in the retail marketing industry. The first contribution is an in-depth analysis of the challenges facing the retail sector both now during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the future post-COVID-19 restrictions. This paper seeks to identify challenges to traditional retail which existed before the pandemic and were exacerbated by the pandemic. The paper also explores new and unforeseen difficulties brought forth by COVID-19 dangers and the mitigation techniques used to minimize its impact on public safety. The second key contribution this paper aims to offer academia and retail marketing practitioners is real and achievable marketing initiatives to overcome these challenges. The paper seeks to identify solutions to the problems identified in paper which threaten the very existence of conventional retail. The author of this paper invites further investigation and thought into the challenges and ideas presented in this writing. Additional research is especially encouraged and recommended into Omni Channel and retail hygiene innovations.

## **CHALLENGES PRESENTED**

### **Overall Safety**

At a national level, a COVID-19 response team was established to mitigate the spread of the virus, and they worked closely with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and World Health Organization (WHO). While they worked to identify specific contact tracing methods, they encouraged everyone to protect themselves by practicing social distancing, wearing a mask, and washing hands regularly. Social distancing became a commonly used term in 2020 amidst the pandemic. The CDC defines social distancing as “keeping a safe space between yourself and other people who are not from your household” (CDC, 2020).

Several states have issued mandates requiring store fronts to follow certain safety guidelines to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus. In Pennsylvania, any businesses classified as “non-essential” had to close for weeks. Once they could reopen in phases, store capacity requirements shifted multiple times from twenty-five percent to fifty percent. In addition, a state-wide mask mandate has been set in place since July in all public places in which someone cannot properly “socially distance” (Hutcheson, 2020).

For months, consumers were discouraged from leaving their households unless they needed to (Whitten, 2020), which unsympathetically impacted the retail market. If retail companies wanted to survive this pandemic from an economic standpoint, they had no choice but to follow CDC guidelines and inform consumers that they are taking the necessary safety precautions. Unfortunately, the safety guidelines created even larger obstacles for retailers when it came to maximizing profits.

### **Shifts in Demand**

When news of the pandemic initially spread across the United States, people began to “panic buy” necessities in fear of a national lockdown. Before retailers knew it, toilet paper, disinfectant wipes and hand sanitizer flew off the shelves. Items that are typically inelastic in demand are now showing major spikes. Toilet paper, which was previously used as a prime example of an inelastic product regarding demand (Robinson, 2020), saw an 845% increase in sales by September 2020 (Narishkin, Cameron, & Barranco, 2020). The demand changed so drastically that manufacturing companies struggled to keep up with supply. Retailers were forced to put a purchase limit on these products to allow manufacturers to catch up. An analogous situation arose with hand sanitizer. Distilleries throughout the United States began manufacturing and selling hand sanitizer after identifying the shortage as an opportunity to penetrate a new market (Distilled Spirits Council of the United States, 2020).

The United States issued a “stay at home” order. People were encouraged to remain in their homes unless it was necessary to leave. Where does this leave millions of consumers with extra free time and little to no activity options? At home, downloading streaming services. Netflix, for example, doubled its new subscription projections, and Disney+ saw twenty-two thousand new subscriptions since the pandemic’s beginning (Luo, 2020). As streaming services benefited from the pandemic, theatres everywhere saw the opposite in terms of demand. In some states, “non-essential” businesses were mandated to close including movies theaters. Any new movies released in 2020 were released on-demand through an online streaming service, leaving only twenty-one percent of cinemas open in the United States by August 2020 (Whitten, 2020).

Exercise facilities were not excluded in the mandated shutdown of non-essential businesses. For months, gyms across the United States had to remain closed to avoid spreading COVID-19. While consumers were bound to their home environments, they began to purchase more home fitness equipment. Peloton, a company that sells state-of-the-art stationary bikes and treadmills, saw a 172% increase in sales by September 2020 (Thomas, 2020). Not only were at-home workouts safer and more convenient during the pandemic, but for some consumers, it was their only option.

Homestay-at-home orders also made an impact on the cosmetic industry. When consumers have nowhere to go but their couch, their desire to apply beauty products decreases. In addition, the mask mandate hindered cosmetic users’ need to apply lipstick. Prestigious cosmetic brands saw a drop between 55-75% in purchase behaviors in 2020. The industry as a whole saw more than a devastating 50% decline in sales

year over year by April 2020, and it has been predicted that it will not recover from this crisis until 2022 (Gerstell, Marchessou, Schmidt, & Spagnuolo, 2020).

### **Change in General Requirements**

There are a plethora of changes affecting the retail industry during COVID-19 that will likely have long-lasting effects far beyond the current pandemic. Shoppers have higher-than-ever standards for shopping hygiene and lower than-ever tolerance for inconvenience. Retailers must confront these changes and adapt if they hope to survive. Conventional retail theory teaches that customers need to be drawn into the store for extended periods. Unfortunately, this strategy is no longer effective during the COVID-19 pandemic. Shoppers are cautious of spending too much time in stores and often seek to limit their exposure in public. This sentiment is likely to remain for a period after the pandemic.

Additionally, consumers are becoming used to the convenience of in-and-out shopping. Finally, most retail stores have to limit their customer capacity, making it unwise to keep customers in the store for extended periods. Shoppers are now coming to buy not browse.

Another key change to retail shopping amid the COVID-19 pandemic has been eliminating in-store samples. Sephora is a prime example of this change. The cosmetics giant no longer offers in store samples for customers to try before purchasing (Bhattarai, 2020). Without the ability to provide testable samples, there is little left to separate purchasing cosmetics online from buying them in person. This change is not limited only to testable samples. There are also stores such as American Eagle that have now started to fold and display their clothing differently to allow customers to experience the merchandise without touching it (Bhattarai, 2020).

Retail stores face another challenge, the expressionless faces of employees and customers. With mask mandates being commonplace during the COVID-19 pandemic, retailers and customers alike have lost the ability to communicate nonverbally through small facial expressions. Emotional connection is further limited in the retail experience through one-way aisles, social distancing stickers, and Plexiglas barriers.

Yet another obstacle retailers must conquer is limited merchandise and fewer impulse buys. Due to limited floor space, many retailers are forced to remove displays to allow for greater social distancing. To prevent unnecessary touching, merchandise must be more spread out. This implies the need to remove extraneous merchandise that could have become an impulse buy by an eager shopper. Retailers must be more accurate than ever when selecting what goods to stock and sell.

### *E-commerce Giants Like Amazon / Walmart.com*

A particularly large hurdle that the traditional retail market is faced with today is competing with online giants like Amazon and Walmart's online store. This problem preexisted in the COVID-19 pandemic but has been exacerbated by the current situation. The consulting firm Deloitte predicted that there would be a 25% to 35% surge in holiday e-commerce sales in 2020 compared to only a 14.7% surge in 2019 (Thomas, 2020). This large surge in online holiday shopping is particularly telling, given that many people are under increased financial strain from the COVID-19 pandemic. This surge is not new customers; it is traditional retail customers moving to online shopping for holiday needs.

One of the key advantages of Amazon and Walmart over the traditional retailer in the online commerce world is an advanced shipping and logistics network. These two cyber titans can offer product delivery at nearly unmatched speeds. Amazon prime offers free two-day shipping to its Prime members (Amazon, 2020). Walmart offers free two-day shipping through its website, even without a paid membership (Walmart, 2020). There are very few items that people need so desperately that they are not willing to wait two days when it provides them the convenience of shopping on their couch.

Consumers are more likely to shop online from home now because they are already home. With many companies encouraging employees to work from home, far fewer people are leaving home for the office. This means there are far fewer people who may decide to stop at a store on their way home from work. Shopping has become its event rather than a brief pit stop on an already necessary journey.

Amazon and Walmart have another key weapon in their arsenal, online reviews. These massive retailers provide verified purchasers the opportunity to review products. Both companies often encourage customers

to leave quality reviews. The vast collection of often thousands of verified reviews lends reassurance to shoppers that is not available in the store. Conventional retail customers cannot use the product for weeks or months, they only have immediate knowledge available in stores. Amazon and Walmart solve this problem by providing detailed reviews that can be updated as people continue to use the product. There are also actual pictures of many developments in people's homes so that consumers can get a natural feel for how things will look and function at home. All these features combined allow many shoppers to feel more confident about buying items online than from in the store.

## **MARKETING STRATEGIES**

### **Omnichannel / Digital Experience Improvements**

The stay-at-home orders did not cause consumers to halt shopping, instead, they changed how they shopped. E-commerce has been up-and-coming for years, but the pandemic rapidly changed the rate it was increasing. The option to buy online and pick up in-store (BOPIS) rose by 195% by June of 2020, according to an interview with Adobe's Digital Insights Manager. It was also mentioned that e-commerce sales went up by \$52 billion, advancing e-commerce projections by four to six years (Koetsier, 2020).

Artificial intelligence (AI) has demonstrated its pros and cons numerous times in recent years. Still, it is a very efficient way for brands to keep a gauge of consumer buying patterns. AI allows marketers to predict future trends and identify what their consumers are really on the market for quickly and seamlessly. It can recommend additional products based on consumer shopping patterns and customize specific discounts based on previous brand loyalty (Davenport, 2020). With the shift to digital advertising on the rise, AI can significantly enhance content development. The use of chatbots has been identified as a "game-changer" for retail companies. Online customer service experiences have improved significantly due to a chatbot's ability to quickly identify and mitigate customer concerns (Hall, 2019). The jump in e-commerce sales in 2020 has made using AI on their websites a non-negotiable in efforts to maximize ROIs.

A digital marketing transformation has been on the rise for years, but 2020 made it an imperative part of every company's branding technique. The agility of a brand's marketing practices was put to the ultimate test, requiring a major digital shift across all industries. Everything was done virtually for months: work meetings, shopping, ceremonies, and family gatherings. After conducting a study of three hundred fifty Chief Marketing Officers (CMO) in 2020, John Koetsier stated:

"Not only did Coronavirus accelerate e-commerce by four to six years in just a few months, it forced us to recognize the need for change. What executives could not force themselves to do, consumers essentially mandated: they voted with their dollars. (Koetsier, 2020)"

In efforts to reinvent in-store shopping, Nike opened a store in Los Angeles that combined artificial intelligence and location-based marketing. The products stocked in the store were based on local consumer trends, and the store itself had screens that highlighted their products' key features and technologies. Consumers could scan a product with their smartphone to access the store's inventory and the inventory for stores around them (Carballo, 2021). Fossil launched a campaign in 2020 that allowed customers to virtually try on their products without downloading an app (Retail Dive, 2020).

### **Empathetic / Global Citizenship Marketing Approach**

As the pandemic swept across the globe, uncertainty about the future skyrocketed. Unemployment rates reached record numbers, and front-line workers were quickly exhausted. The Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) linked loneliness and isolation with mental illness, but these factors were inevitable to prevent the spread of the virus. In January 2020, a study concluded that twenty percent of people (one in five) reported having at least one mental illness. Six months later, the same survey stated that one in three people reported having one or more mental illnesses (Panchal et al. 2020).

People were forced to deal with every form of loss, whether it was financial, occupational, or the loss of a loved one. Marketers recognized these statistics and began producing advertisements that show

empathy toward consumers. They put a pause to traditional branding and developed heartfelt stories to better align with their customers' current emotional abilities. Dunkin' Donuts released a campaign with the tagline, "We're Here for You." The campaign was an effort to reassure customers that it was safe to continue ordering from them throughout the pandemic and remind them that they were still open (Dunkin', 2021). Amazon released a holiday commercial demonstrating a young ballet dancer who spent months rehearsing, only for her show to get canceled due to the pandemic. Upon noticing her disappointment, her community came together by purchasing spotlights and other supplies from Amazon.com and organized a makeshift show where she could still perform (Jardine, 2020). This empathetic campaign was titled "The Show Must Go On."

Consumers struggled to grasp a sense of security in any aspect during these uncertain times. This was built on top of consumers raising concerns about data privacy. Rooting from the Facebook Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2016, concerns about data mining and the context in which consumer data was being collected came to a head in 2020. Adobe predicts that marketers will avoid using cookies and rely more on "first-party data." They will no longer purchase consumer data from third-party providers (Abramovich, 2021). This is a major step for consumers concerned about the security of their personal information.

### **Payment / Pick-Up Options**

Retailers should create marketing campaigns around contactless payment options for the current and post-COVID market. This is another great way to reiterate safety and convenience. Payment options should center on contactless payments. With modern systems, customers can hold their enabled credit card, phone, or even smartwatch near the card reader, and it will register payment. Other options include services such as Venmo, allowing customers to transfer funds directly to the store. Contactless payments eliminate the need for customers and employees to handle potentially contaminated cash bills and coins. It also eliminates the need for customers to touch the same high-contact surfaces of the pay stations every other customer has had to handle. One study by MasterCard polled 17,000 consumers in 19 countries and found that they perceive contactless payments as "the cleaner way to pay" (Walden, 2020). It has already been established that consumers want cleaner shopping experiences, and contactless payments are a great way to increase public perception of retail hygiene.

The push to contactless payments also appeals to the increasingly cashless society. Anyone can look around and see that fewer and fewer people are carrying cash around daily. This is particularly true in the younger generations. Studies have shown that cashless payments increased by \$10 trillion annually from 2015 to 2018 while ATM withdrawals drastically decreased (Holzhauer, 2020). People are speaking with their wallets that they prefer the convenience and perceived security of cashless payments over hard cash. Retailers should recognize this trend and use it to regain relevance post-COVID-19.

In addition to contactless payment, retailers must consider maintaining and increasing their curbside and in-store pick-up services. Consumers have fallen in love with curbside pick-up's speed and convenience, which is unlikely to change as COVID-19 restrictions are lifted. A recent study found that when "asked whether they [consumers] would continue to visit businesses minimally even as things open up, 45 percent said they would do so, and 38 said they would "very much" do so. Sixteen percent said they would not cut back on visits" (Maynard, 2020). Many consumers polled expressed little interest in returning to the pre-COVID status quo shopping. Retailers need to seek to win back their in-store customers and maintain their curbside presence before it is lost to solely online shipping.

### **Innovative Safety Improvements**

Another key strategy to marketing success for retail in the post-COVID-19 economy is emphasizing improved safety standards. Consumers want to always feel safe without giving up their shopping experience. Retailers need to embrace and showcase their intelligent and elegant solutions to shopping hygiene. Shoppers want to feel safe and cared for without being inconvenienced. Retailers should place signs throughout their store detailing their commitment to community and safety. They should have prerecorded messages on their speaker systems that indicate their commitment to a safe and pleasant shopping experience. There should be physical barriers of Plexiglas to separate staff and customers at the

checkouts. Aisles should be one way to allow for an easy flow of traffic and avoid people congregating in one area. Social distancing stickers should be on the floors to ensure proper spacing between shoppers in line. Retailers should enforce mask wear and provide great hand sanitizer. All these safety measures are already in place in most retailers. With all these standard safety measures already in place, what can retailers do to stand out?

One way is through air filtration. A NASA study found that HEPA air filtration systems are able to filter COVID virus particles out of the air (Heffernan, 2020). Retailers should consider investing in and then touting HEPA filtration in their HVAC systems. This technology is effective, sounds cutting edge, and carries name recognition behind it. Another great tactic retailers should consider is implementing thermal cameras at the entrance of stores. These cameras are a noninvasive way to screen customers and employees for fevers as they enter the store (Harwell, 2020). The cameras scan as people enter the store typically and will only alert if a person is running a fever. This technology avoids the hassle of individual IR thermometer guns while providing essential protection from COVID-19 and other fever-causing illnesses. There are some ethical debates over the invasiveness of these scanners, so retailers should keep a close eye on the customer's reaction to this technology (Harwell, 2020). Finally, retailers should invest in and champion high-tech sanitization methods such as IR lights and foggers. Anything that appears innovative will assure the customer that the store takes cleanliness and safety seriously. Convenience and an abundance of caution should be united through technology to make shopping in store safe and enjoyable again.

## CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the struggling retail market to confront old and new problems. There is an essential problem of safety for employees and customers as well as the problem of unseen shifts in demand. There is the problem of ever-changing requirements. Finally, there is the problem of online behemoths like Amazon and Walmart online. Retail is not doomed, however. Through decisive and innovative marketing, retail can return to its former glory. This paper recommends retail marketers improve their Omni channel experience, emphasize corporate citizenship, innovate payment and pick-up methods, and champion health safety technology. Retail is a sleeping giant that only needs the right push to awaken and reclaim the throne.

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