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# What Are Physical Store Retailers Waiting For?

Adaptability can make the difference between going back to business and going out of business. What are physical store retailers waiting for?



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by Veenu Sharma

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Customers usually enjoy the shopping experience by sensing or getting the feel of the whole process. While shopping for a garment the customer touches it to feel the texture; sees the dimensions of the garment and makes sure about its fit. Even in the grocery section customer chooses the best possible products by touching and smelling. All five senses namely, sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste are used by the customer devoting reasonable time in-store before making the final decision about the product s/he intends to buy. However, everything changed since the pandemic- social distancing becoming the new norm, "No touch" is a new buzzword and transaction through cash is a dirty word. This implies physical retail format is changing, experience and memories at store are not same as earlier. While entering the store now we are greeted with hydro-alcoholic gel to wash our hands; the smiles of sales associates are hidden under the masks, and customer is touching the products with gloves. What is this, Is a new Retail emerging?

It is indeed a challenging proposition for the retailers as the old normal is unlikely to get restored. Physical stores had been facing competition from contactless retailers like Amazon and other online players mainly on account of convenience in terms of shopping time, transportation cost, and delivery at door. The pandemic intensified the whole process. What used to be the practice limited to a narrow base because of convenience has now become a compulsion due to pressure of maintaining social distance leading to horizontal expansion of the base. Retailers or brands need to adapt themselves to the new retailing norm.

A recent study by McKinsey pointed out the changes in customer behaviour as they prefer to stay at home relying on online shopping mainly to avoid visiting stores. Retailers can't afford to be in a wait-and-watch mode. Retail stores that somehow have managed to survive the lockdown and now eager to have customers back with the changes changes in the way the store is

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customers through portable applications and other innovative processes including voice-initiated shopping, most of the customers may still be looking forward to the tangible experience offered by the offline(physical) stores. It is time to rejuvenate the physiological capabilities of human beings towards the physical world of retail and build a new positive perception. Retail companies are anxious about customers' positive attitude in the post-COVID 19 and win back their trust proactive customer relations. Getting customers back to the store requires some effort. A recent study on Customer Lifetime Value by Klarna points out that customer is looking forward to an in-store experience, thus retailers should rethink about strategies for brick and mortar.

Retailers need to build an entirely digital model after choosing the level of digitization required w.r.t their merchandise and customers. In-store shopping, limited contacts, BOPIS, curbside pickup, robot delivery, or unmanned store are the new level of digitization stores can implement. Retailers have to automate shopping experiences in such a way that the customer needs to put almost no time and energy into buying what (s)he needs. Convenience is something that every customer demands, looking at the current scenario retailers should focus on transactional convenience. One of the best transactional convenience has been observed at Alibaba's Hema Supermarket for their frictionless and transparent experience to customers. Where the customer is getting the complete backstory of the product, like where the product was manufactured, processed, and delivered at the time of scanning the product. Such activities communicate the safety standards adopted by organizations for customer health. Installing sanitizer-dispenser is not the solution, retailers have to communicate their hygiene standards beyond that. No-contact delivery is what the service industry is already following, even automotive industries are also using VR technology to showcase their range. Physical stores have to bring this contactless engagement in-store either by creating an online sales assistant or use of AR and VR. It's time to leverage the power of AR QR codes by providing a safe engaging channel for customers to learn more about the product without any human touch. All Smartphone users can easily unlock the high-quality Web AR content about the product and retailers can use this innovation to deliver an AR experience without any worry of app adoption. Retailers or brands have to find new ways to create a touch-free environment with the use of AR and VR.

Customers have changed a lot in the past few months leaning towards the digital options. Retailers have to position themselves as experience hubs by offering customers a new way to choose their products. The pandemic has pushed retail stores towards uncertainty but also provided fantastic opportunities to meet future challenges. Time is up now for physical stores to respond to customer expectations and adapt to the breakneck speed of technology. Adaptability can make the difference between going back to business and going out of business. What are physical store retailers waiting for?

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The author is Assistant Professor, Retail and Marketing, Baril Institute of Management Technology,

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