

RETAIL

Turn to Walmart, Walgreens and Target to distribute COVID-19 vaccines to US consumers

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By **Soozan Baxter**

The American public is thirsty for leadership. Political hacks are going on the cable news programs to recant their promises, while anchors are looking for gotcha moments.

The blame game is dizzying, while more than 70 percent of COVID-19 vaccines are waiting to be distributed.

Early on, if there was true faith that a viable vaccine and fortunately, there are now three would be approved by the end of the year, then a distribution and implementation plan should have been created.

With the widespread disenchantment about how the nation has handled COVID-19, it is easy, once again, to be angry about how every level of government, and across political parties, has once again failed its citizens once again.

Think out of the box

In the absence of government leadership and solutions, that anger should be redirected into a big ask: To the CEOs of Walmart, Walgreens and Target, which now owns CVS, please band together and take over the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine, both safely and swiftly.

Collectively, these big box pharmaceutical distribution companies have more than 21,800 bricks-and-mortar locations in all 50 states, as well as the American territories.

These are the companies that know logistics better than any other industry.

These companies are responsible for ensuring that meat, lettuce and ice cream go from pickup to on-site refrigeration to kitchens across America without spoiling.

These companies ensure that certain drugs are only distributed to those with a valid prescription.

These are the companies that have robo-calling to remind one when to come in for a refill and send a text saying the prescription is ready. And these are among the key retail locations that more than 49 percent of Americans visited during the 2018-19 season for the flu vaccination.

Walmart, Walgreens and Target have the experience and history to get the vaccine into millions of people quickly.

They have the infrastructure to properly distribute the appropriate number of vaccines to each state and region throughout the United States. They have the ability to keep the vaccines at the right temperature and ensure that none are spoiled when injected. They have the trust-quality as consumers have been accustomed to getting a flu shot in their local store for years. They deal with narcotics under lock-and-key and can ensure the security of the COVID-19 vaccine. They have the technology in place to remind Americans to return back to the store for their booster shot.

A successful roll out of the COVID-19 vaccine screams for a partnership among the government, the vaccine companies, and Walmart, Walgreens and Target.

Can it be done?

Location, location, location

On Aug. 5, 2019, *New York Times* business staff writer Andrew Ross Sorkin wrote an open letter to Walmart CEO Doug McMillon, imploring him to be part of the solution in ending gun violence.

Mr. Sorkin, like many Americans, had been waiting on a government solution on guns. But when Walmart was hit by gun violence earlier that summer, the company took a strong leadership position, ending the sale of ammunition used for handguns and military-style weapons, ending the sale of handguns, and banning anyone from carrying weapons in Walmart stores.

Walmart made it easy for Americans to change their minds about buying guns, allowed for other companies to take a stand, and still left the government to legislate as it sees fit.

Calling on private companies to solve public problems are plentiful.

In the auto industry, changes to emission regulations have been relentless, particularly between the Obama and Trump eras, and then between the federal and specifically California state government. The mismatched regulations are confusing for both businesses and customers.

But in 2020, Ford said it would adhere to the stricter standards set forth by California, hoping other car companies would follow. Volkswagen and Honda have. With the announcement also came the statement that Ford wants to play a role in curbing greenhouse gas emissions.

Another private sector agent of change was highlighted in December 2020, when it was revealed that Pornhub was a haven for child abuse, nonconsensual sexual activity and human trafficking, Visa immediately decided to temporarily suspend payments across the platform while an investigation was pursued. MasterCard and Discover cards followed suit. Pornhub was put on notice to change its business ways.

The private sector must raise its hands to be the solution for the vaccine distribution and implementation.

If the vaccination pace continues at its current rate, it could take upwards of 10 years for U.S. consumers to get vaccinated.

Our country cannot afford to continue to wait for the government to stop fighting and find an answer. The service economy has been crushed. The COVID-19 spike in the last two months surged beyond crisis-level status. How is it that the U.S. of all nations, has hospitals turning away critically ill patients?

The moratorium on collecting rent will come to an end this spring, and the bill will be due.

UNTIL THERE IS widespread vaccination of about 75 percent to 85 percent of the population, according to Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of NIAID, COVID-19 will remain a dangerous health risk and a viable threat to a healthy economy.

Instead of waiting for the call from the federal or state government, the private sector must heed the call. The big-box and chain pharmacy companies are American's greatest hope for turning a rocky start into a triumphant rollout.

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