

APPAREL AND ACCESSORIES

COVID-19 and fashion: Lingering effects in 2021 and beyond

April 13, 2021



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By **Rania V. Sedhom**

It is April 2021 and COVID-19 is largely in the headlines there are discussions about vaccines, virus variants and resurgence. Not surprisingly, the definition of revival, particularly in fashion, is a hot debate topic.

Of concern to retailers is the bricks-and-mortar establishment and its apparent downfall.

Although likely a contrarian view, this article focuses on why bricks-and-mortar stores will not only survive, but be a driving force in profits for brands.

First and foremost, there is a thirst for human interaction and tactile shopping.

While the Internet is convenient and socially distant, it does not afford consumers with what traditional shopping provides socialization, instant gratification, tactile pleasure, true color and fit certainty.

Socialization and shopping are congruent consumer socialize with friends and family, personal stylists and salespersons while shopping.

The collaboration between the consumer and stylists, when done right, is a driving force for brand loyalty and increased wallet spend.

Consumers are loyal to brands, to their salespeople and to both. Their loyalty translates into earnings, plain and simple.

As we resume socialization bricks-and-mortar stores will be filled with shoppers, not browsers.

Instant gratification. Consumers miss instant shopping gratification. They shop online and wait for their packages to arrive.

In store, consumers leave with the items that they purchased or have them hand-delivered the same day. No waiting time is necessary.

COVID-19 causes illness to those who contract it. For the rest of the population, at a minimum, it causes stress and anxiety associated with waiting.

We have all done a lot of waiting the last 14 months we wait on line to do most anything, we wait for results, we wait

for statistics, we wait for new protocols, we wait for packages, we wait for appointments we wait.

Consumers have waiting fatigue. Wait no more buy in store. Tactile pleasure, true color and fit certainty is nothing at which to scoff.

Consumers crave touching merchandise prior to purchasing it and they want the validity of color and fit.

Second, bricks-and-mortar stores will be used to enhance a customer's experience with a brand.

Experiential shopping, or retailtainment, creates a convergence of immersive technology and product to facilitate sales.

The entertainment provided during the retail experience helps support customer loyalty and brand recognition.

A few brands have already begun retailtaining: Vans, Farfetch and Huda Beauty.

Third, product variety. Several retailers are offering different products to online versus bricks-and-mortar customers.

I predict that bricks-and-mortar stores will eventually phase out discounts, moving reduced-priced merchandise exclusively to their online platform and saving special and bespoke pieces for in-store customers.

The primary goal for consumers will be to maximize their profit per square foot.

By removing discounted merchandise from stores, companies will train consumers that experience and instant gratification come at a price: full MSRP.

By offering exclusive merchandise in-store, brands will reward consumers with of-the-moment, hard-to-find merchandise, igniting curiosity and joy, and swiping credit.

In what I think is a brilliant move by Saks Fifth Avenue, it has separated its retail store from its online counterpart, while allowing consumers to return to merchandise easily through various means.

While the rationale for this move was not announced, other retailers, particularly those in a mall setting, should take note.

Mall owners customarily charge percentage rent, based on both in-store and online sales.

By disjoining the two methods of sale, companies can eliminate paying a percentage of online sales as part of that percentage rent.

Bricks and mortar will continue to be the backbone of retail.

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