



Return to Retail

PREPARING YOUR STORES
FOR THE RUSH OF PENT-UP
IN-STORE SHOPPING DEMAND

Zipline



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Traditional brick-and-mortar retailers have experienced many challenges in recent years, from the growth of e-commerce to declining foot traffic to brands bypassing stores to sell their products direct to consumers. However, nothing prepared them for the disruption wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Non-essential stores were forced to temporarily shut their doors, and when they did re-open, they did so with limited capacities and other onerous restrictions.

Even today, as the pandemic appears to be in its waning days and COVID vaccination rates rise, retail stores are still trying to recover. While store foot traffic is on the rise in many sectors, it has yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels, according to this May 2021 [article](#) in *The Wall Street Journal*. In the wake of these challenges, retailers must ensure they're creating great in-store shopping experiences. After a year when the retail industry made major adjustments, preserving a positive customer experience is essential. In today's omnichannel retail environment, that could mean meeting customers where they are, from BOPIS (buy online, pick up in-store), returning online purchases, simply browsing in-store merchandise, to curbside pickup. And, of course, retailers must also ensure the experience is as safe as possible for customers and employees.

In addition to prioritizing safe shopping experiences, consumers have come to expect (and in many cases even demand) convenience from brick-and-mortar retailers. Curbside pickup and home delivery may have begun as the only safe ways to shop during the pandemic, but now these shopping behaviors are here to stay, long after the pandemic is gone.

While digital channels such as e-commerce, mobile and social media have all seen increased consumer adoption in the last year-plus, including year-over-year revenue gains, customers get a true brand experience in a retailer's brick-and-mortar store. That's why it's more crucial than ever for retailers to reinvent physical stores for the future as part of a true omnichannel strategy.

ESSENTIAL RETAILERS: SUSTAINING MOMENTUM

The current brick-and-mortar retail landscape, and each individual company's standing within it, has been impacted by its designation as an essential or non-essential retailer. For essential retailers such as grocery stores, big-box stores, home improvement stores, and drug stores, which were allowed to stay open throughout the pandemic, there's not quite the urgency to prepare store teams and the physical locations themselves for an impending rush of shoppers. These retailers already dealt with that surge in demand at the outset of the pandemic. Rather, they're looking for ways to sustain the positive momentum they've created during the pandemic, including the improvement of services such as buy online, pick up in-store (BOPIS); buy online, return in-store (BORIS); curbside pickup; among others.

Essential retailers are having to address that challenge while dealing with a shortage of in-store talent. The retail industry, and store associate positions in particular, have notoriously had high turnover rates. This is due to a number of factors, from the demands of the jobs themselves to low pay to a lack of upward mobility within the organization, and the problem has only been exacerbated over the last year-plus. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show that job openings in retail have risen steadily for the past six months. Preliminary figures from March showed 878,000 retail openings — not a record, but higher than any point in the past two years.

NON-ESSENTIAL RETAILERS: ENHANCING THE STORE EXPERIENCE

As for non-essential retailers, which were forced to temporarily close their stores in 2020 because of the pandemic, the focus is on winning back the trust of consumers. And that's going to require them offering convenient, safe ways to shop, enabled by store teams who might have their own concerns. With an expected surge of foot traffic on the horizon, non-essential retailers are looking to position themselves to capture that increased consumer demand.

It's through services such as BOPIS, ship-from-store, curbside pickup, and BORIS, which need to be executed flawlessly to meet customers' high expectations, that non-essential retailers can win back consumers' trust — and share of wallet as well. However, it can't just be business as usual, particularly for store teams. Retailers will need to hire additional staff as well as train existing store workers on new job responsibilities, such as fulfilling online orders from their stores for in-store and curbside pickup; ship-from-store order picking, packing and shipping; and ensuring customer compliance with any company safety protocols that have been put into place. And in many cases, employees will be asked to do all of this while working fewer hours.

What's at stake? The National Retail Federation (NRF) recently upped its 2021 forecast, predicting retail sales to grow between 10.5 percent and 13.5 percent to an estimated total of \$4.44 trillion to \$4.56 trillion this year. This growth is being driven by an economy rebounding from the [coronavirus pandemic](#), customers spending money they've socked away, and an increasing COVID vaccination rate. Retailers must prepare their stores to capitalize on the opportunity at hand.

ASSESS STAFFING NEEDS

One of the first things retailers will want to do as they prepare their stores for the post-pandemic world is ensure they have adequate staffing levels to handle the surge in demand. This could include bringing back workers who have been furloughed, transitioning part-time workers into full-time workers, and hiring new employees to supplement existing staffing levels. In all cases, retail stores will need to position themselves as attractive places to work through a combination of competitive pay, attractive benefits and perks, effective training and communication, and the opportunity for upward mobility.

A good exercise for retailers to go through is to evaluate their associate and labor needs. For example, ask the following questions of your organization:

- Where have associate labor needs increased or decreased?
- How do store processes and layouts change to meet social distancing guidelines?
- Who needs to be working and when?
- What tools do associates need to be safe and successful?
- What is the right mix of people and technology in our stores?

The answers to these questions will help inform your company's strategy for labor planning and store operations.

ASSESS TECHNOLOGY NEEDS

According to a recent report from Total Retail, [Retailer Readiness: COVID-19 In-Store Safety Index, Part 2](#), retailers are doing a good job of using technology to create a less-friction, more convenient customer experience at payment (80 percent of the 100 retailers assessed offer contactless) and purchase pickup. For example, many retailers have invested in inventory and order management systems to facilitate BOPIS and curbside pickup options.

However, there are areas where retailers need to show improvement. Besides strengthening store safety measures, more retailers need to add signage and remove obstacles that impede store traffic. And in-store staff need to be trained and knowledgeable about not only product information, but company policy and procedures as well. Consumers returning to stores for the first time are likely to have more questions than normal; store associates need to be able to give them answers.

LEVERAGE YOUR STORE TEAMS

In addition to planning for store design and safety protocols, contactless technologies, and convenient omnichannel services (e.g., BOPIS, curbside, BORIS) to help capture the influx of shoppers returning to retail stores in the second half of 2021, including the critical Q4 holiday shopping season, retailers should be leveraging the full capabilities of a well-trained and well-informed store team. For example, retailers should ensure that they have a process for collecting feedback from their store associates. After all, these employees are the closest to the customer and the feelings of the market.

Specifically, there are four types of feedback that retailers should be collecting from store teams:

- **Directional Feedback:** This messaging ensures that tasks are being completed by associates accurately and on time.
- **Organic Feedback:** This type of feedback is valuable when you want to tap into individuals' experiences in the field to dig a little deeper into task execution or employee sentiment, or when you want to capture unfiltered in-the-moment thoughts.
- **Informational Feedback:** This refers to the need to collect the same information from a large group of stores, or to ensure that information is tracked down to the individual.
- **Actionable Feedback:** This messaging helps retailers tap into specific stores' or employees' areas of opportunity, and then take swift action.

The feedback loop between corporate headquarters and store teams must work in both directions. Headquarters must be communicating with store teams on a regular basis, and the messaging should be personalized down to the store level. Blanket communications, particularly in an COVID era where regions of the country are progressing at different rates, won't work and aren't sustainable. For example, a Home Depot store in Southern California may be required to be operating under different guidelines than a Home Depot location in Nebraska, and as such, corporate communications to each individual store cannot be uniform.

The role of communications from HQ to individual store teams is to optimize performance, including within areas such as marketing campaign execution, receiving inventory shipments, driving IT and technology rollouts, merchandising, loss prevention, safety compliance, among other functions. Having the right communications platform in place — i.e., one that's easy to use as well as able to centralize and personalize data and messaging between HQ and the field locations — increases the likelihood that these tasks are completed as intended and on time.

When implemented and used correctly, a communications platform that connects HQ and store teams can help establish a consistent shopping experience across a retailer's entire store network, improving customer experience in the process. Given the level of competition that exists within the retail industry today, both online and offline, experience is often the primary purchase consideration for consumers. Give them a positive experience, which is highly influenced by a well-informed, organized in-store team, and they're likely to come back to your business to purchase again. That's the beginning of a long-term, loyal customer relationship.



L.L.BEAN KEEPS ITS STORES SAFE WITH HELP FROM COMMUNICATIONS PLATFORM

L.L.Bean has ensured that pandemic-related safety policies and procedures from headquarters are seen, understood and completed on time by store teams. The leading outdoor apparel and gear retailer is using compliance features of the Zipline communication platform in all 54 of its stores across the country. The platform enables L.L.Bean's store and operations leaders, many of whom are based in the company's headquarters in Freeport, Maine, to send messages to the entire store fleet in seconds. Messages can be targeted and managed by location and role so only the teams who need to know are alerted.

Furthermore, L.L.Bean is using Zipline's platform to conduct health and safety surveys to obtain confirmation employees have read and understand communications. The retailer can also use surveys as a tool for associates to report on personal health and whether they've been exposed to the virus. The responses are time-stamped and visible to headquarters to ensure compliance.

Lastly, understanding the value of personalizing communications on a store-by-store basis, L.L.Bean is using the communication platform to better understand which stores are meeting COVID-19 safety standards and which ones might need additional support or training, including access to a centralized resource library of in-store protocols. The information is able to be filtered by geographic region so individuals only see what's relevant to their specific store location

Furthering the level of personalization available via the Zipline platform, L.L.Bean store managers can share information with individual employees so they know what they need to do, and when. Auditing features track compliance of stores and can verify who reads the messages.

L.L.Bean's ability to communicate, educate its store teams, and track what's actually been done in stores has improved tenfold, ensuring record-high compliance for the retailer.

BEST PRACTICES TO OPTIMIZE THE IN-STORE EXPERIENCE IN A POST-PANDEMIC ENVIRONMENT

With store foot traffic increasing and consumers excited for in-person shopping, retailers need to ensure their physical locations as well as their personnel teams are ready. Here are some steps they can take to capitalize on the opportunity at hand, helping to provide frictionless experiences that will make customers want to come back again:

- 1. Earn (or re-earn) the trust of your customers.** Retailers can do this through their safety policies and communications, with in-store staff ensuring compliance with company protocols as well as disseminating information to questioning shoppers. Regarding the latter, staff will need to be equipped with the answers to consumers' questions, which figure to be higher in volume as many return to stores for the first time.

2. Prioritize staff education/training for serving customers in this new environment.

Communication tools will be critical to getting your in-store staff aligned with corporate policy and instructions. This training should be tailored to the individual store and geographic region, as different store locations have different needs, requirements and, most importantly, customers. Take the following steps to ensure that critical information developed by HQ is communicated and understood by store teams across your business:

- Provide a single source of information for store team's live-long documents, such as policy and procedure, best practices, performance review criteria, onboarding, marketing standards, and training videos — i.e., “a digital binder.”
- Break up training into bite-sized pieces. People, especially Gen Y and Gen Zers, typically lack the patience to digest long-form content. Therefore, retailers need to deliver communication in more digestible and bite-sized ways, so store teams aren't spending a half-an-hour reading corporate messages, freeing them up for more mission-critical tasks. Establish a consistent stream of digestible information.
- Give context with your communications. Employees want to know how the work they're being asked to do benefits the greater good of the organization. Combine communication and task management so store associates always have the context behind requests.

3. Keep convenient COVID-related services. Consumers' expectation of convenience will remain long after the pandemic, and therefore it's incumbent on retailers to deliver on those expectations — no matter the channel. The frictionless execution of services such as BOPIS, curbside pickup, BORIS, contactless payments, etc., will be critical to the future success of retailers. This speaks to the need for corporate leadership to provide easily accessible product knowledge and training on new tasks, helping frontline associates to service customers with speed and ease in a variety of different capacities.

4. Adjust strategy based on essential vs. non-essential status. Essential retailers should focus on improving existing experiences for customers. This means optimizing processes such as BOPIS, curbside pickup, BORIS, ship-from-store, and utilizing the newly acquired skill sets of store associates to make it happen. Those skills should be being honed through regular and consistent communication with HQ that provides in-store staff with the information and resources they need to do their rapidly evolving jobs more effectively.

Non-essential retailers should focus on winning back consumers' trust. That will require offering convenient, safe ways to shop, enabled by well-informed and well-trained store teams. And they're going to need to do this quickly: they haven't had the benefit of being open throughout the pandemic and are starting behind their essential retail counterparts. Properly training and educating returning and new in-store staff will be essential in order to keep pace both with heightened consumer demands as well as competition from essential retailers.

CONCLUSION

Optimism abounds in the retail industry as consumers show with their attitudes and actions that they're ready and excited to return to in-person shopping. In order to capitalize on this opportunity, including welcoming back existing customers as well as acquiring new ones, retailers will need to ensure convenient, frictionless, and safe shopping experiences, increasingly across multiple channels.

One of the first steps in this process will be winning the hard-earned trust of consumers, including existing customers. Consumers will expect that retailers are taking all of the necessary actions to ensure their safety and convenience, which starts with having formalized protocols and processes, and then communicating that information down to store associates, the true faces of retail organizations. Consumers will likely have questions as they return to stores after a prolonged absence in many cases, they expect that store associates will have the answers for them.

In addition to developing trust, retailers also need to recognize that consumer behavior has shifted. What previously were nice-to-have services such as BOPIS, curbside pickup, BORIS, and contactless payments, are now expected by customers. Convenience is a trend that will never go out of style. Therefore, in order to keep pace with their competition, which are undoubtedly offering these types of services as well, retailers must find ways to optimize their processes to provide safe, convenient and frictionless shopping experiences, executed by knowledgeable and prepared store teams.

That's where communication enters the equation. To develop well-trained, knowledgeable store teams, which are able to provide the frictionless experiences that consumers have come to expect and demand, there needs to be an easy, convenient and consistent communication channel between corporate leaders at HQ and individual store locations. Today's retailers are competing on customer experience. To win, retailers must align their messaging across their organization. The right communication platform does just that.



WHO WE ARE

Zipline

Zipline is the leading communication and execution platform for retailers. Built with the complexities of retail in mind, Zipline helps HQ streamline and coordinate communications with the field, in a way that makes store teams happier and more productive while improving compliance. The company's goal is to improve the lives of one million retail employees by 2025, and the platform is already used by leading brands such as Allbirds, L.L.Bean, Hy-Vee Inc., Lush Cosmetics, BevMo!, LL Flooring, Cole Haan, TOMS, Torrid and others. To learn more, please visit getzipline.com.



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TotalRetail

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