

RETAIL

Attention, brands: Post-pandemic you need to find your vital

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By **Alasdair Lennox**

Only six weeks ago, there were many ways to view the brands in your life. There were business-to-business brands and business-to-consumer brands, vertical categories and all kinds of ways to categorize them. Now there are just two: vital brands and non-vital brands.

The challenge for non-vital brands specifically brands in categories such as luxury, automotive, real estate, fashion and travel is that they will have to find a new way to engage, to gain a more elevated emotional response, and I think that is going to be hard.

No shoo-in

Luxury consumers may really like their Italian leather shoes that cost 500 bucks, but right now no one is buying them. The good news is many are looking forward to the near future when they can buy them.

It is that near-term future three to six months from now that non-vital brands need to be thinking about. What is their purpose in a post-pandemic world?

The hard truth is, I do not think a non-vital brand can simply pick up where they left off a month ago. I think they need to revisit what their purpose is and essentially "re-pitch" themselves to the consumer.

Of course, a cynic might say all brands have to do is offer a 10 percent coupon and customers will be back. But that is a tactic, not a strategy.

Promotions will get momentary attention but make no mistake, consumers will be reevaluating their relationships with some brands and they will be looking for something more substantial than they were the first time they met.

The same is true for retail.

I have listened to some retail prognosticators who believe that once consumers can get everything home delivered, they will never want to go to a store again. I disagree.

We can stream movies and cook meals at home, but eventually we will want to go to dinner and watch a movie. So I absolutely believe there is a post-pandemic role for bricks-and-mortar retail, but the actual store design and experiences will need to be quite different.

For better or worse, this event will force brands that have been reluctant to make any kind of change in their branding store design, ecommerce to now have no choice.

Retail detail

The founder of Fitch the late, great Rodney Fitch often spoke about the different waves of retail with the first being "unorganized retail" such as mom-and-pop shops and indie boutiques, then "organized retail" such as supermarket chains and Walmart, followed by ecommerce.

Post-pandemic there is a reshuffling of those and I am not sure what the next phase looks like, but I do not think it is simply omnichannel.

The pandemic has also offered retailers a chance to change the conversation.

Look at what has happened with Walmart and Amazon: Before the pandemic hit the United States, the conversation surrounding Walmart was mostly negative centering on low-wages, healthcare benefits, and driving out local business.

Now, for most Americans, Walmart is definitely seen as a vital brand.

Conversely, pre-pandemic Amazon had been seen as the model for everything that is good about retail, but today has definitely suffered some negative hits about its treatment of workers, wages and benefits.

Maybe this is a moment for "boring" big brands such as CVS and Walmart to say essentially "we're not pretty but we're reliable in times of crisis."

So if you are a non-vital brand, how do you reclaim your "vitality?"

First, consumers will remember what you did or did not do during this crisis. Did you keep your staff employed? Did you maintain their health insurance? Were they ingenious in how they supported or made something?

These do not have to be monumental things, but even small actions can be a starting point for non-vital brands to re-engage with their consumers.

Next, this has been an emotional time for many, and brands need to recognize that in their messaging. Brands need to be thinking now about the emotional connection they want to have with their consumers and amplify that in every way consumers interact with your brand: online, in-store, on social media and advertising.

Finally, do not assume you can pick up where you left off. This pandemic has changed people irrevocably and brands will have to court consumers again just as if you were launching for the first time.

THIS PANDEMIC has been agonizingly challenging on so many levels, but non-vital brands that have been sidelined by the crisis will soon enough have their chance to recapture the magic with their consumers.

What they do with that chance may, in turn, seal their fate or represent a rebirth.

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