

The Morphing of Store Operations in a Post Pandemic Environment

Retailers must adapt to changing shopping behaviors in order to succeed in a post COVID-19 environment. Social distancing guidelines will still be in place, and masks will be commonly worn and sometimes will be required when out in public. Retailers will also have to consider other factors in their business: how they handle returns, how to assure consumers that the store associates are healthy, and what provisions could be deployed to ensure that shoppers don't infect each other and associates. For example, thinking through whether fitting rooms will be in use and if they are, how to handle clothing after someone has tried on a garment. These are some immediate considerations.

But beyond the immediate, there are other factors to consider when preparing to reopen. Consumers in a post COVID-19 world have altered expectations of a retail experience, and this is due primarily to two factors. First, there's a heightened awareness of the risk of infection from others, and how the nasty invisible virus can linger and be transmitted to other unsuspecting individuals. Second, their experiences as online shoppers have opened them up to new ways of buying and interacting with technology.

Envisioned Retail Stores of the Future

Let's take a walk through a couple of imagined fashion retail stores of the future:

I walk into a clothing store. It is a store that I've shopped in many times before, but it looks very different inside. Clothing is displayed on mannequins and elsewhere for me to see and even touch if I choose, but there are no fitting rooms and none of the product is out on shelves and hangers, available for sale. As a new addition, there are QR codes on all the displays and high-tech mirrors on the walls.

I use my phone to scan the QR code for a blouse I like, and then I walk over to one of the mirrors and, interacting with the mirror through my phone, I see myself in the blouse through the mirror. I can also see the size that is recommended for me when I stand on the designated spot on the floor, so I know how it will fit me given my body shape. The mirror also recommends other accessories and clothing that would complement the outfit. I try on various things to get the look I want. On my phone, I indicate that I want to buy the blouse in the color and size that suits me best and pay through my phone.

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Now that I'm done shopping, I walk to the pickup area. When the purchase is ready, I get an indication on my phone and I can pick up my shopping bag. Inside the bag is my blouse, which is packaged in sealed plastic from the factory. It has not been in any way exposed to germs from other shoppers or store personnel; no one has handled it, although I might take some precautions with the plastic wrapper when I get home.

Next, I stop into my favorite cosmetics store. Again, things are different than they were the last time I was here. There are still makeup artists in the store to help me navigate through all the choices and advise me on the best new look. But when I sit down at the counter, we're also interacting with a touchscreen. And the artist wears gloves and a mask throughout the whole process, and there's a clear glass 'sneeze barrier' between us because we can't stay six feet apart. The screen was sanitized and covered after the last consumer sat in this seat, and now it is uncovered by the artist who is assisting me. We talk about my skin, my preferences, and the outfit that I'm planning on wearing tonight. I get advice on products to use that would best suit the occasion and the outfit, and I try a couple of different options through the screen.



I can get a makeup application that day to look my best for later. It's also fun to get makeup done by a professional. That process is also a bit different this time. The makeup artist uses a sanitizing machine where she picks out brushes that have been completely cleaned and sanitized and uses these during the makeup service. And instead of using a full-sized tester that was already open and previously used, a new small tester size is used for each product that's applied.

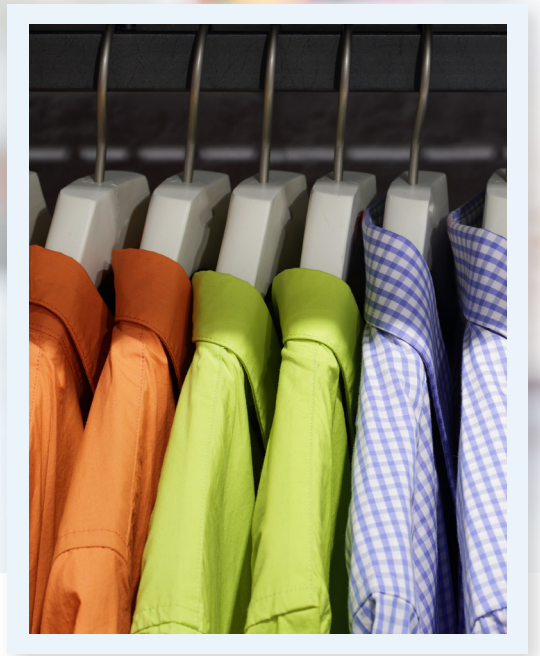
Now that the application is completed, it is time to make my purchases. Through the screen the artist picks out the products that I'm buying, I make my purchase through a contactless payment process on my phone. While waiting for the products to be assembled and brought to me from the back room, the artist has moved on to help the next customer.

Technology for the Post Pandemic Retailer

Are these 'stores of the future' so far-fetched? The technology exists. Some of it is already in use in retail stores, and some of it is also already in use online. There will, of course, be different technology that could be employed in different retail sectors. While these examples may not become mainstream, they represent a morphing of online and retail capabilities, giving consumers a safe way to still enjoy their shopping experience.

What are consumers expecting in this post-pandemic world? They are very anxious to be free to go shopping again, but they'll want to do it in a way that protects their and your associates' health. And they are more open to using online tools to help find the right products they are considering buying. Top on the list is they want interactions that limit contact and risk. It's unlikely they will be comfortable using fitting rooms or trying on and buying clothing that could be infected from someone who tried on the same article of clothing or used the same fitting room minutes or hours before, where those nasty invisible germs may linger for hours or days.

What do you think? What tools and processes do you want to deploy in your stores? There are many factors that retailers need to consider in order to open their stores, but the ones who are ahead of the curve on the new retail experience stand the best chance of surviving this pandemic, but those who don't may succumb to this virus.



Building a Better Tomorrow

RPE can help retailers traverse the new normal. In communication with a broad spectrum of retailers, our seasoned retail experts understand the challenges during these unprecedented times. RPE expertise expands across many different inventory deployments, POS systems, planning and pricing solutions.

Retailers are enlisting the help of industry experts to help build a new tomorrow. RPE can help position your business to take advantage of the anticipated economic recovery.

Make an appointment with an RPE expert to talk through the decisions your company needs to be considering now to provide recommendations in the recovery of your business.

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