

# Six Feet Apart:

Technology and Retail Customer  
Experience in an Age of Pandemic



# Adapting for Today and the Future

COVID-19 has changed the world. It has certainly changed the retail environment. Stores that are not considered “essential businesses” have closed. Those that have been able to remain open have had to rethink everything from how many shoppers can be in the store at the same time and whether to turn aisles into one-direction only to maintain the required distance between shoppers and staff and minimize or eliminate contact at checkout.

Customer experience remains a critical element in the decisions that retailers are making. They know these decisions will shape their customer relationships now and in the future. As McKinsey notes, “[p]articularly in times of crisis, a customer’s interaction with a company can trigger an immediate and lingering effect on his or her sense of trust and loyalty.” Decisions made today will have long-lasting implications.

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The convergence of digital acceleration and the need to meet evolving customer expectations offers brands and retailers new opportunities to shape how they sell. At a time when in-store presence is curtailed, brands that can bridge the gap will reap rewards now and into the future.

Source: 'Adapting customer experience in the time of coronavirus | McKinsey & Company | April 2020

# Digital Acceleration

The lines between online and in-store experiences have blurred as technology has evolved to create virtual spaces that address customer needs. Consumers had already taken to the online world to research products over visiting a physical store, and even when visiting a store they may pull out their phone to conduct further research on a product. Smart devices, artificial intelligence, and the internet of things are heavily influencing the way businesses serve customers—as day-to-day, in-person interactions wane.

Since the imposition of stay-at-home orders and amidst safety concerns, consumers have turned to technology to meet their needs. Even digitally resistant consumers have adopted technology as a means of filling the gaps that are left by store closures and changed business models. While orders are lifted and safety concerns are reduced, experts do not expect the expanded use of digital to revert back to where it was. “Digital-led experiences will continue to grow in popularity once the coronavirus is quelled, and companies that act quickly and innovate in their delivery model to help consumers navigate the pandemic safely will establish a strong advantage.”<sup>1</sup>

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# Evolving Consumer Expectations

With companies such as Amazon setting the pace for personalization and customer experience, instant gratification became an expectation for consumers and a constant struggle for businesses. Even in the midst of a pandemic, people want to be treated like individuals and expect quick and responsive service. Delivering that level of service during disruptions can be challenging. But businesses that readily adapt will be repaid with customer gratitude in the short term and customer loyalty in the long term.



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Maintaining—and even improving—customer experience while operating in a business climate that demands cost efficiencies, is not impossible. Evolving technologies now give retailers that are unable to provide in-store training for associates or product assistance for customers the ability to do so virtually—over mobile, text, web chat, and video chat. Brands that once delivered on-premise product knowledge and support can now do so through the same channels. These digital sales and services may even be less expensive than in-store models—helping companies reduce their costs while improving customer satisfaction.

# Adapt for today. Prepare for tomorrow.

From the first days that stay-at-home orders were issued, retailers quickly adapted to contact-free, remote environments. Many ramped up online ordering along with home delivery or curbside pickup. Those that were not yet offering those services quickly put them in place. Others built environments to deliver information and services that were once only available in person. Still others offered real-time product support to in-store shoppers and retail associates through video chat as well as web chat, mobile, and text.

Virtually overnight, consumer behavior changed to accommodate the many ways in which businesses transformed in order to meet their needs. From placing online grocery orders to driving up to their favorite restaurant to pick up their order curbside, consumers adapted quickly to the new realities.

As consumer usage and preference for digital and virtual experiences increases, it is unlikely that the trend will reverse as we move past the COVID-19 crisis. There is widespread consensus that these changes are here to stay. Companies that adapt now to meet current demands will be better positioned to meet changed consumer needs and expectations later.

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# The Next Normal

It has been said that nothing is constant except change. That statement is more true today than ever. As a partner to some of the largest and most respected brands in retail and B2B, MarketSource has remained on the leading edge of change. Today, with a robust and flexible tech stack, combined with strong yet nimble processes, and backed by the support of technologists, process designers, learning experts, and more, MarketSource has led our clients in quickly pivoting to meet rapidly changing needs. As we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis to the next normal, we will continue to innovate and adapt to anticipate and meet changing business and consumer needs.

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