

GOVERNMENT

## Walpole CEO on UK lockdown: Resolution on reflection is real courage\*

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*Boris Johnson, prime minister of the United Kingdom, announcing the second lockdown in England that mirrors similar restrictions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to stem the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. Image credit: 10 Downing Street*

By MICKEY ALAM KHAN

A government-mandated lockdown in the U.K. regions of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is yet another blow to British luxury brands as the country is threatened with a resurgent COVID-19 outbreak.

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The U.K. lockdown comes on the heels of similar national restrictions on movement in France, Germany, Belgium and parts of Italy and Spain. Quite clearly, governments in these jurisdictions are gearing themselves for a second bout of COVID-19 infections that may dwarf the first round in their intensity.

Business is yet again the unfortunate casualty in this second lockdown. While the United Kingdom will allow factories to operate, the same exemption is not extended to retail stores, hotels, restaurants and locations that are deemed non-essential.

The U.K. lockdown is ostensibly for a month, with a review to enable some element of family gatherings around Christmas. But ministers have warned that the lockdown could extend beyond November, thus jeopardizing the Christmas season that was British luxury's last chance to recover lost ground this year.

Helen Brocklebank, chief executive of U.K. luxury sector body **Walpole**, penned a note to members outlining steps that the organization is taking to help mitigate some of the damage imposed by this second lockdown. Here is what she had to say:



*Helen Brocklebank is chief executive of Walpole*

A second lockdown has, perhaps, always been inevitable. It's no more welcome for that, and its timing is bitter.

With a little over seven weeks to Christmas, this is the time of year all Walpole members have been banking on to mitigate some of the impact of the first lockdown.

The closure of hotels, restaurants, culture and "non-essential retail" can't help but bite at the heart of hope. COVID is cruel, wreaking havoc not only with the nation's health but with its prosperity, too.

If we are, as Prime Minister Johnson said on Saturday [Oct. 31] evening, "to be humble in the face of nature", then as businesses we must also be proud of how far we've traveled in eight months: digitization; innovation; the creation of entire new businesses and brand extensions; forging ahead in export markets in South East Asia where a very strict response to the virus has made for a speedy economic revival.

It will be important to remember the exceptional way you responded to the first lockdown when dealing with the challenges of the second. Take courage as well as pride in what you achieved in the face of such disruption.

A few things jumped out at me from the Prime Minister's speech, in addition to the welcome and essential return of the Job Retention Scheme (furlough).

Firstly, "non-essential retail can remain open for delivery to customers and click and collect" and this may well be essential social distancing in warehouses and distribution centers and reduced capacity may create its own challenges in the face of pre-Christmas customer demand.

And, secondly, "hotels should only open for those who have to travel for work purposes and for a limited number of other exemptions which will be set out in law."

Walpole is investigating what these "limited exemptions" might be, and also looking to see whether non-essential retail's ability to remain open for delivery and click-and-collect may offer a glimmer of possibility.

Yet, and yet "humble in the face of nature" is one thing: this is going to be an exceptionally difficult time for all businesses, and if we're to accept that there's no alternative, then let's not add manmade troubles to the ravages of nature' the manmade and unnecessary devastation that the abolition of VAT RES will wreak on the sector's recovery plans is even more unthinkable than it was when it was announced: Walpole will be redoubling its (already considerable) efforts to urge the Chancellor to take the option of a WTO transition period to delay this decision until such a time as we can look at it with a clear head.

The same might be said of Brexit is it time to put the brakes on a hard, no-deal exit from the E.U.?

But when it comes to the next four weeks (let us pray it may not be longer), what you've already proved is that there's a will there's a way: your determination, tenacity, resilience and resolution in the face of the biggest challenge any of us will ever face in our lifetime has been extraordinary.

No one wants to have to screw their courage to the sticking place twice in the same year, but you will. Better times will come.

*\*'resolution on reflection is real courage' is a quote from Horace Walpole, youngest son of Walpole's namesake, Sir Robert Walpole, Britain's first prime minister.*

*Helen Brocklebank is chief executive of **Walpole**, the sector body for U.K. luxury brands.*

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