

RETAIL

Brands must reprioritize consumer communications: retail execs

March 11, 2021



COVID-19 has reshaped the retail and fashion industries with new ecommerce strategies in place. Image credit: Neiman Marcus

By NORA HOWE

The COVID-19 pandemic upended the fashion, retail and ecommerce industries and consumer lifestyles, forcing many companies to reconfigure their business strategies.

Subscribe to **Luxury Daily**
Plus: Just released
State of Luxury 2019 **Save \$246 ▶**

From retail store closures to order cancellations to the massive shift towards digital commerce methods, nearly every aspect of the industry was affected. During a session at the [Michigan Fashion Media Summit](#) on March 10, industry professionals discussed how brands and retailers have pivoted and harnessed new opportunities to grow their businesses and how consumer engagement has been impacted permanently.

"Customers want to shop wherever, however they want, and they will come to expect that," said Marianne D'Elia, head of merchandising and planning at [Shinola Detroit](#). "Brands must remain nimble in order to meet consumer demands for digital business and ecommerce."

Remaining adaptable

When the virus initially made its impact on North American businesses nearly one year ago, the number one priority for most company leaders was the safety and wellbeing of their employees and customers.

"Our first thought was: is everyone okay?" Ms. D'Elia said. "We started thinking about ways we could work together through the situation, looking at our business from different locations and assessing which resources we had to meet new demands from consumers."

Within the first few weeks of lockdowns, consumer lifestyle habits and behaviors began to shift. Gabby Etrog Cohen, marketing and communications at men's grooming brand [Harry's](#), noted a paradox between consumers pausing their lives due to being at home and adopting new habits to take care of themselves.

"On one hand, from the perspective of Rent The Runway, we had to help customers as they faced massive transitions to their wardrobes and encourage them to pause their accounts and not cancel," Ms. Cohen said. "On the other hand, at Harry's, our business immediately shifted to trying to keep up with demand as everyone began doing hair and facial upkeep at home."



More than 138,000 visitors experienced Burberry's new social retail store in 2020. Image credit: Burberry

Ecommerce accelerated exponentially as consumers were forced to buy online.

"We were forced to build products that were planned for 2030, in 2020," said Annie Xiong, senior partner manager at Shopify Plus. "People were needing to get their products into customers' hands, so speed has been a huge factor over the last year."

Additionally, the lack of travel has specifically impacted the luxury retail sector, as many brands rely heavily on international consumers shopping at physical stores.

"For us, what really happened was a blending of online and offline," said Thibaut Perrin-Faivre, senior vice president of retail at Burberry. "We had to bring the store to our clients, which meant utilizing new digital tools, such as virtual appointments and direct messaging between associates and customers."

Although stores have reopened with safety protocols in place, many of the panelists agreed that the pandemic will have lasting effects on how physical stores are used and the in-store customer experience.

"If a customer is making the effort to come into a bricks-and-mortar store, they are there for a specific purpose," Shinola's Ms. D'Elia said. "Nine times out of 10, they just want to get in and get out."

"I think how consumers use stores will continue to evolve and the location of final transactions may change, but I think, particularly in the consumer goods and apparel industries, people want to interact with products," she said.

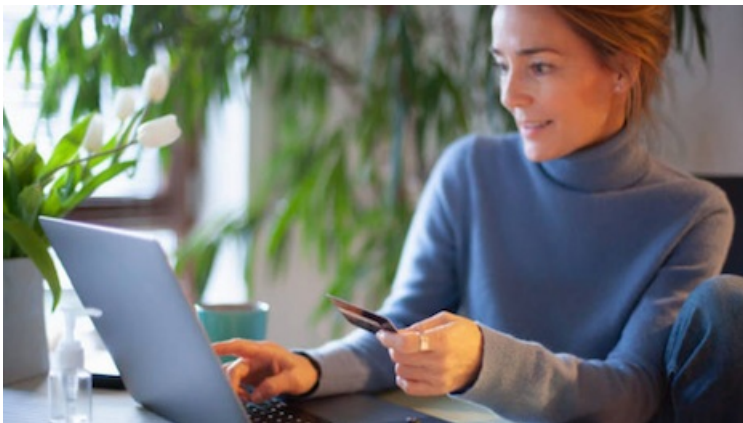
As consumer behavior changes, so do marketing strategies.

"As an industry, we have had to reprioritize how we communicate with customers," Ms. Cohen said. "Businesses must understand what is important to their customers, and be transparent."

"You cannot dance around things," she said. "Being upfront and having honest communication is key."

Another thing many companies have refocused on is attention to their own employees, acknowledging that people are the core of any organization.

"In response to the pandemic, our goal was to keep our people inspired and motivated," Ms. Xiong said. "We wanted to make sure employees actually enjoyed where they worked, so we supplied desks, chairs and additional office budgets so they could stay engaged in this unfamiliar work environment."



COVID-19 has created new consumer expectations for brands and retailers. Image credit: Getty

For many companies, building trust is key to fostering connections for both employees and customers. Mr. Perrin-Faivre identified four things that he has focused on over the past year with his own department: empathy, empowerment, trust and kindness.

"The worst thing that can happen in an organization is people not speaking their truth," he said. "But always make sure that when you talk to someone, you do so with kindness."

Retail experience

Luxury brands have implemented new creative strategies and collaborations to elevate the retail experience and engage customers both in-store and online.

U.S. retailer Nordstrom is partnering with smart home gym **Tonal** to bring the strength training system to customers nationwide. The experience is expected to launch this month in the women's active department in 40 Nordstrom locations across 20 states in the United States.

The partnership will be brought to life through a 50 square foot concept where visitors can experience a full Tonal demo and try a workout firsthand ([see story](#)).

U.S. retailer Bloomingdale's has partnered with British fashion brand Stella McCartney to curate The Carousel at Bloomingdale's: Stellabration pop-up shop. The Carousel at Bloomingdale's is a rotating shop driven by culturally relevant themes and curated by guest fashion experts.

Stellabration will immerse visitors in the world of Stella McCartney, featuring the designer's genderless Shared capsule collection for the first time at Bloomingdale's, as well as its spring 2021 and resort 2021 accessories collections ([see story](#)).

© 2021 Napean LLC. All rights reserved.

Luxury Daily is published each business day. Thank you for reading us. Your [feedback](#) is welcome.