

MARKETING

## Post-pandemic consumers expect brand awareness, authenticity

April 28, 2021



*Each generation has differing approaches to consumer activism. Image credit: Facebook*

By SARAH RAMIREZ

Brands that take a human-centric approach in their messaging will gain a competitive edge, according to research from consumer insight platform Resonate.

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A turbulent 2020 marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest has spilled into 2021, the majority of U.S. consumers are "disrupted" by feelings of stress and anxiety. Resonate's ["State of the Consumer 2021" report](#) found that about two-thirds of consumers still believe normalcy is at least six months away and this caution is influencing their shopping habits, as well as their desire for comfort and convenience.

"The past year has upended daily life for Americans in every way imaginable, and brands have struggled to stay relevant in a world where their customers are constantly bombarded with breaking news," said Bryan Gernert, CEO of [Resonate](#), in a statement. "Consumer values are being put to the test, and meaningful human relationships look quite a bit different than they have at any other point in history."

The report is based on Resonate's continuous [National Consumer Study](#), which surveys a representative sample of more than 100,000 consumers several times a year.

### Mindfulness meets convenience

More than nine in 10 U.S. adults, 97 percent, reported being concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic to a moderate or large extent. Resonate describes this segment as 2021's "disrupted consumer" who values safety, tradition and reliability and is driven by trust and competence.

While 22 percent of disrupted consumers are concerned to large extent about contracting COVID-19, 47 percent reported being concerned to a large extent about the greater economic consequences of the pandemic.



*A number of retailers introduced contactless curbside pickup during the pandemic. Image credit: Neiman Marcus*

Half are not worried about their personal financial situation, and many continue to actively spend on nonessential purchases. However, they remain influenced by the pandemic as 34 percent still avoid physical stores and 27 percent are increasing ecommerce purchases.

With the exponential growth of online shopping, consumer expectations are also evolving.

More than a third of disrupted consumers, 34 percent, say shipping is a deciding factor in choosing between in-store and online shopping. Curbside pickup and same-day delivery are also in demand, as cited by a respective 39 and 34 percent.

Email marketing is one of the dominant ways brands and retailers are reaching consumers, with 81 percent receiving promotional emails in their inboxes. About a third of consumers, 32 percent, will download a store app for additional perks and 33 percent still receive direct mail marketing.

Bricks-and-mortar is not out of favor, however, with 44 percent of consumers believing browsing in a physical store is important.



*The in-store shopping experience is still valuable to luxury consumers. Image credit: Neiman Marcus*

As shoppers return to stores, they want to feel comfortable and more than half, 53 percent, expect staff and customers to be wearing masks. Other expectations include social distancing enforcement, nightly disinfecting and reduced occupancy.

Communicating about these efforts is key for brands and retailers so consumers can feel safe and trust that their communities are also being protected.

#### Articulating brand values

Without the carefree in-store experiences and sales associate interactions of the past, it has become even more crucial for brands to build and maintain emotional connections with consumers. Like many activities during the pandemic, this is now primarily done online.

Although 54 percent of disrupted consumer spend more than 20 hours a week online, only 15 percent currently follow brands on social media. To grow their reach, brands should emphasize empathy.

Half of this segment prefers spending on companies that are honest and trustworthy. This also means brands should feel more comfortable speaking out on cultural issues, particularly when brand and consumer values are

aligned.

For instance, 19 percent of disrupted consumers are more likely to shop from a brand or retailer that supports the Black Lives Matter movement. Similarly, 17 percent say equality influences their retail choice and 14 percent report the same of tolerance.

Moving forward, consumers will keep spending on products that can offer safety, dependability and, particularly noteworthy for luxury brands, pleasure. Four percent of consumers plan to increase spending on luxury purchases in 2021, creating an opportunity for high-end brands to vocalize their values and connect with consumers.

This spring, several luxury brands and designers have released statements of support for Asian Americans in response to a recent uptick of racist crimes against the community. These public figures, influencers and brands are speaking out in an attempt to prevent future acts of violence targeted at Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Americans (AAPI) and to ensure the safety of consumers ([see story](#)).

Similarly, more consumers now expect luxury labels to show their commitment by investing in circular design, anticipating second lives for their products and improving supply chains to match their new standards. Women are more likely than men to connect luxury brands with sustainability and, specifically, fashion brands are currently acting as excellent exemplars of sustainable luxury ([see story](#)).

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