

Coronavirus has turned retail therapy into retail anxiety - keeping customers calm will be key to carrying on

By [Jessica Vredenburg](#) and [Megan Phillips](#)

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So you finally hit the shops and cafes after weeks of lockdown. After disinfecting your hands, following the arrows around the shop or to your table, taking care to avoid others where possible and, in some cases, providing your contact tracing details - how enjoyable was the experience, really?



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The return to shopping and eating out has certainly come as welcome relief in those countries lucky enough to be opening up. The malls are open! You can book your favourite restaurant! Goodbye home cooking, hello table service!

And for the retail and hospitality industries, among the [hardest hit](#) during the Covid-19 pandemic, the return to trading couldn't come fast enough.

The return to normal trading, however, could still be a way off.

The new economic reality will have a profound impact on retail. Some of the routines developed during lockdown, such as cooking and baking at home or foregoing daily takeaway coffees, may continue post-pandemic if money is tight.



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2 Jul 2020



Shopping as a sensory experience will change

As well as the public spacing, tracing and hygiene rules, customers may also notice an absence of certain favourite experiential elements. Is a trip to [Mecca Cosmetics](#) as enjoyable when you can't sample the products? Will [Peter Alexander](#) still smell like a cosy bedroom or the disinfectant used to clean the store?

As consumers, our senses play a major role in how much we enjoy retail experiences. Retailers have long employed the art

of [store atmospherics](#) to encourage us to stay and spend.

Atmospherics – such as scent, music, touch, temperature and crowding – all help create an engaging [sensory experience](#) for shoppers and patrons. Research suggests customers will [stay longer, spend more, feel better, and be more satisfied](#) in a retail environment they find pleasing to their senses.



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The new Covid-19 environment has changed all that.

Will shoppers now prefer a reassuring freshly cleaned smell? The Hyatt hotel chain's "[seamless](#)" scent (evocative of home and comfort) was an integral part of its brand experience. But the rival Hilton chain has just announced its [CleanStay](#) initiative in partnership with the manufacturer of Lysol disinfectant.

Keep the noise down and don't touch

In New Zealand, tips on how to [stay safe](#) under its Covid-19 [alert level 2](#) include restaurants and bars turning down the music volume. Raised voices, it seems, generate a wider "[moist breath zone](#)" that may increase [viral spread](#).

Reduced sound levels might help anxious consumers [relax](#), but what will the atmosphere be like in a painfully quiet pub or restaurant? It [could influence](#) customer perceptions of the establishment, which in turn affect financial returns. Studies have found people bought more drinks in a bar when the music was [louder than usual](#).

[Retail guidelines](#) in New Zealand recommend consumers only touch and try on merchandise they intend to buy. In the US, [no touch retailing](#) seems increasingly likely.

Such measures confound conventional retail theory, which suggests the more consumers touch, sort through, sample and try on, the more they buy. The removal of [testers](#) for products such as cosmetics, for example, significantly changes the shopping experience.



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Don't stand so close to me

Retailers in countries entering winter will also need to think quite literally about the atmosphere in their stores. Warmer temperatures tend to create a [relaxing environment](#) that encourages shoppers to linger. And physical warmth can even [enhance](#) the perceived value of products. But poorly ventilated or air-conditioned indoor spaces have been [identified](#) as potential hot spots for the spread of COVID-19.

Will warmer stores subconsciously affect the way shoppers react? Restaurateurs and retailers will be hoping not.

Paradoxically, the advice to keep our [distance in public](#) can lead to perceived crowding – a [psychological state](#) based on the number of individuals in a store, the extent of social interactions and the configuration of merchandise and fixtures. Higher levels of [perceived crowding](#) can lead to less positive emotions and decreased satisfaction.

Shoppers may simply choose not to enter. If they do, they might feel on edge or even [overwhelmed](#) if they are trying to keep a safe distance from others. When [personal space is invaded](#) or when [personal space zones](#) are relatively large, it can lead to intolerance or even leaving.



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The customer is always right

Ultimately, if retailers and hospitality service providers want customers to return in greater numbers the goal will be to minimise the perceived risks of infection. Emotionally taxing environments can [negatively affect](#) consumer behaviour, so managing the emotional component of the retail or dining experience becomes an even more crucial part of the overall value offered.

Adapting so-called “[retail theatre](#)” to include sanitation, hygiene, and keeping consumers calm will create a new kind of [psychological comfort](#) for the Covid-19 age. But how far will some go to give themselves an edge over competitors?

“ Amid coronavirus outbreak, ritzy Virginia restaurant plans to seat mannequins in dining room

The Inn at Little Washington, which has a Michelin three-star rating, will maintain the image of a full house with dummies assuming the role of satisfied patrons. <https://t.co/lZGfqPi9RK>— New York Daily News (@NYDailyNews) [May 14, 2020](#) ”

From [pool noodles, mannequins and glass boxes](#) to [inner tubes](#), will these innovative adaptations draw in the crowds or make people run in the opposite direction?

How readily customers become comfortable with the etiquette of post-pandemic shopping will dictate how effectively retail and hospitality can provide that vital sense of well-being. In time, the words “retail” and “therapy” may again sit comfortably in the same sentence.

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