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THE COST OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

THE CURRENT LOCKDOWN IS LIKELY TO ACCELERATE TRENDS THAT WERE ALREADY EMERGING BEFORE THE PANDEMIC, WRITES EILEEN CONNOLLY

Retail was in trouble before Coronavirus. The crisis has merely accelerated all the embryonic strategies that emerged in recent times. Proactive landlords were already taking steps to engage more collaboratively with occupiers, reimagining vacant space, listening to their consumers and harnessing the power of good communications. Those without a new vision were facing increased voids, declining income and diminishing footfall.

It's interesting to remember that throughout history almost every human upheaval in lifestyle has been the direct result of disease or social and industrial change – homes, businesses, agriculture, emigration and resettlement forced by the need to improve or protect the health of families and communities. Coronavirus is making us do the same.

So, what now for our shopping destinations? We have to reset the parameters of what is physically possible in a world dominated by social distancing and for the shopping centre world in particular this will come at a cost.

As a starting point we have to communicate clearly with our customers – our past, present and future physical shoppers. They are looking to the institutions they trust for guidance and comfort on the key issue of maintaining a healthy environment or we risk them staying home with the lockdown on-line habit.





EILEEN CONNOLLY IS JOINT MANAGING DIRECTOR AT AL MARKETING

We are clear that communications must be clear and confident, flexible and targeted to the catchment demographic. Accurate content needs to be cascaded from landlord to centre management, staff, occupiers, media and customers alike. The marketing budget is likely to have been slashed but it will be a false economy not to engage now across digital and traditional channels. Consumers have become used once more to the power of the spoken word, the media briefing and news outlets as trusted sources of information from the government and public health authorities. Rushed, inconsistent or intermittent communication now will do more harm to the precarious position we find our shopping centres in today.

Open centres and retail parks have an obvious advantage to enclosed spaces but all have the social distancing measures to manage. How many shoppers can be in the common areas and at what point do shoppers feel uncomfortable about the proximity of others? The hard fact is that our centres will not accommodate the footfall enjoyed pre Coronavirus and that means fewer sales for retailers themselves challenged by the number of staff it takes to operate stores for a diminished return. This formula just will not work long term. Evidence from mainland Europe shows an opening blip of young, fashion deprived consumers flocking to their favourite stores only for the numbers to drop back in the ensuing days. We have yet to understand the shift in shopping patterns and how that will affect customer services, occupier mix and even opening hours.

More mature consumers with greater disposable income will need far more convincing that shopping centres offer a safe environment. Social distancing will be observed by those who feel themselves most at risk so how we tell them, and show them, what steps are being taken on their behalf is crucial. Giving pre-visit information, building confidence and displaying visible efforts to meet their expectations is key to rebuilding loyalty lost to the on-line world.



COLLECTIVELY WE NEED TO FIND A ROUTE THROUGH SOCIAL DISTANCING UNTIL SCIENCE OR MEDICINE OFFERS A SOLUTION. USE THE COMBINED SKILLS OF MARKETING AND MANAGEMENT TO CREATE COMMUNICATIONS THAT WORK FOR EVERYONE AND REBUILD THE TRUST AND LOYALTY OF OUR CONSUMERS.



One irony of pulling customers back to a real shopping environment is that we have spent time and money for many years on creating experiences, authentic interactions and excitement to combat on-line convenience and value. Social distancing will create a whole new, and not entirely enjoyable, experience. Our planned events and activities are postponed for the meantime – no quest to build unnecessary dwell-time and attract crowds.

The experience now needs to be driven by safety, hygiene and empathy for expectations and needs. We do then have a responsibility to try and welcome back the customer, keep them engaged and grateful for the steps centres take to make their journey worthwhile. Once more, signage, communication and tone of voice must be audience relevant and memorable to achieve that connection again.

Social distancing is taxing the minds of management teams across the country – heavy-handed approaches will alienate and fuel worries – lax operations will create fear. Collectively we need to find a route through social distancing until science or medicine offers a solution. Use the combined skills of marketing and management to create communications that work for everyone and rebuild the trust and loyalty of our consumers. This isn't a cost, it's an investment for the future.

