

Why retailers should be given a shot at the vaccine rollout

 By [Michael Smollan](#)

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As the world enters a new Covid phase we are now getting to grips with the practicalities. We have worked out pretty much where our healthcare capacity problems lie and how to protect those. We have a clearer picture as to how to treat the illness with much greater success, and on an individual level we have worked out how to adapt our lifestyles in ways that will slow the disease.



Credit: Artem via Pexels

The practical problem we now face is down to how we manage the vaccine rollout.

It is all very well to hear the politicians talk about the number of vaccines they have or haven't secured and when they will be arriving. This either makes one feel better or worse about the situation and raises a whole lot more questions about the plan or potentially the lack of one, going forward.

The vaccine rollout involves literally millions upon millions of single injections that need to arrive at their destination; be kept cold (or not) through the entire journey; be broken down into smaller batches; sent into cities and towns across the country and then into the hands and fridges of administrators. They then require people to line up one by one to be recorded, injected and some weeks later, a repeat injection to be administered.

This may sound simple but the logistics and complexity of us getting basic everyday medical supplies to every part of the country is a big challenge in itself, despite a pandemic-level vaccine rollout. Add to that problems around anti-vax sentiments together with a lack of information and rural scepticism in terms of western medicine, which may well mean people won't be lining up. The programme rollout will need to educate and corral with a need for clear explanations at point of sale.



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Valuable retail distribution networks

I personally have mapped out a lot of this journey, not because I'm an expert in vaccination programmes but because I've been living and breathing FMCG supply chains to the end consumer for more than 20 years. Take milk for example – there is no harder task than getting fresh milk into a consumer's fridge via a massive store network. Granted people want the milk, I'm just not sure how many people want the vaccine.

That is why I believe there is no better platform to help get the vaccine to the people, than the retail distribution networks. The Shoprite Group, as a South African example, probably has a better penetration into rural South Africa than electricity or water does. Just let that sink in for a minute.

They have this massive capillary network to move fresh and dry groceries in and out of the population like arteries to and from the heart. I know because we have people as the arms and legs of this nationwide network just waiting for those products to be able to put them on shelves; to support the product with the correct information and ensure attractive point of sale for people to purchase.

If I were in government, I would turn to the retailers for help as they are used to these types of mass rollouts along with being able to collect and collate relevant data.

Potential of partnership

Covid has certainly taught us over the past year, the potential that lies in public, government and private partnerships that is why if I were sitting in President Biden's chair I would pick up the phone to Andy Jassy, who has just [replaced Jeff Bezos](#) as CEO of Amazon, and Doug McMillon, CEO of Walmart, and give them full control over the vaccine distribution. They would have it done in a few weeks. On that note, I see Amazon has just offered to help and that Walmart has as recently as last month been enlisted to distribute via their pharmacies.

I know for a fact that if Hindustan Unilever can get a tiny packet of washing powder to a million rural Indian villages for their Shakti micro entrepreneurs to sell, they can get a vaccine to pretty much anywhere in the world and effectively track exactly how this was done. Again, I know this because we oversee this programme in India for HUL. I can only imagine how their purpose-led CEO Alan Jope and his team would jump at the opportunity to be part of this global rollout.



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The capability in supply chain to consumer is unrivalled by retailers, e-retailers and manufacturers. Their ability to get goods into consumers' hands, and in this case shots into arms, could potentially operate seamlessly as a parallel universe to their current supply chain.

Clearly, the governments of the world must align with this capability and I think the retailer ecosystem of the world, and I include our own business here, would be only too proud to be a part of the solution, as the world restores itself following this great interruption.

I feel that governments when in times of trauma need to think, who would be the most effective partners to have on board. Those that are able to resolve issues as quickly, efficiently, and effectively as possible. To not think that they can get a rollout of this magnitude done themselves as with the greatest respect we know that bureaucracy and systems don't allow many governments to quickly move themselves.

The right carefully-vetted partnerships could prove greatly beneficial and fill existing supply chain gaps, as in this instance the adage 'time waits for no man' ticks loudly.

ABOUT MICHAEL SMOLLAN

Mike Smollan is Chief Growth and Innovation Officer at Smollan.

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