

Digital strategies key for retail to survive a shifting consumer landscape

By [Jan Bouwer](#)

28 May 2020

The world is in uncharted territory and as many businesses face the harsh reality of lockdown, we are beginning to accept that jobs will be lost, orders will be cancelled, and many doors will not be reopened.



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The retail sector has been on the front lines of Covid-19 as hospitality services grind to a halt and demand for non-essential goods such as electronics and luxury apparel plummet.

We do know that the impact will vary, for example, while restaurants have closed their doors, supermarkets and pharmacies are recording unprecedented sales as demand for pantry items and disease prevention materials have skyrocketed.

However, as with most things, the uncertainty of how long this wave of panic buying will go on, remains.

As many businesses begin to recover from the initial shock of an after-corona world, we need to look to recovery as soon as possible. We need to predict how competitive positions and customer relationships will be fundamentally changed. In many markets, retailers are looking to online sales as a lifeline as

the sudden shift to digital takes hold.

Multichannel retailers with both a physical and an already established online presence may be at a disadvantage as they face heavy rental costs and must support an inert workforce. For digital natives – companies that have built their business from the ground up using only digital channels – there is an opportunity to pivot and adapt rapidly.



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Digital transformation fundamental to survival

Larger retailers are going to need to re-look at their digital strategies as it becomes clear that digital transformation is no longer just a buzzword, but a fundamental path for business survival. And this is not only applicable to retailers, logistic and courier partners will also need to change the way they do things to meet shifting demand. To survive, they will need to streamline data and act on feedback loops to maintain efficiencies in a time when it is needed most. Never before has the case for a digital twin been stronger.

Retailers need to look at their customer base and understand their requirements and expectations when it comes to online ordering and delivery or collection. In South Africa, it is even more important to get this right taking into account our digitally divided societies.

If one thing is clear it is that survival is going to call for a reinvention of product, a deeper understanding of your audience,

a keener focus on waste reduction and a commitment to making things that last. Just as luxury brands have switched to making masks and hand sanitisers, businesses need to play to their strengths to deliver to new market needs.

There is no question that this will be a test of resilience for those who take the right steps to ensure they can still maintain trust and confidence when the wave is over but how can businesses go about doing this? Reassuring your customers has never been as important and it's critical that you let your customers know where you stand and get ready to pivot, reinvent and bounce back.



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27 May 2020



Businesses such as bookstores or online fashion labels need to get their online and digital marketing strategies up to scratch to ready themselves for a digital-first future. Larger businesses need to be thinking of medium-term planning for eventual recovery, looking to apply digital models to optimise supply chains and logistics.

For these businesses, strong leadership may be the defining factor to survival. We will need leaders who can embrace the change, infuse positivity in some way and accelerate digital strategies to survive.

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