

# Retail Insights

SPECIAL  
EDITION  
2020

## 10 Things About Touchless: Minimizing Contact in Physical Retail

As we began 2020, the economics of brick and mortar retail were tenuous at best. Store closings, corporate reorganizations, bankruptcies were being announced on a near-constant basis for retailers who were struggling to survive. And then the COVID-19 shutdown occurred. This put many traditional, “non-essential” retail brick and mortar stores into disaster-mode, hoping to simply survive until they can safely reopen.

Yet even when stores do re-open – and in some states this is already occurring – store owners need to consider ways to make their spaces as safe for shoppers as possible: preserving the inherent pleasure of in-person shopping while minimizing potentially harmful physical contacts. One idea to be considered: touchless environments. While the trend in public spaces has, for some time now, been moving in the direction of “touchless” devices, this has been mainly in the context of toilet facilities. However, a wide-range of “touchless” possibilities exist:

### Enter/Exit

**1) Door Types.** Most stores have swinging entry doors with or without vestibules. At least one set of automatic doors (commonly referred to as handicap doors) are usually provided as a customer amenity at each entry. Automatic sliding doors are typical at stores that use shopping carts. In the future, more automatic doors, swinging or sliding, may become the norm.



**2) Number and Direction.** Depending on size, many stores have multiple entrances. Entrances typically also serve as exit doors. This multi-directional flow is now problematic as it can lead to congestion and thus a lack of social distancing. Larger stores may have the advantage of dedicating different door locations to either entrance or exit. Stores with one door may need to modify the existing door, create new door locations, or monitor in and out sequences.

**3) Vestibules.** Vestibules may become more important as a way to control in and out traffic and to contain air flow into the store.

**4) Posted Information.** Doors are a critical point of opportunity for educating customers and employees regarding safe practices and changing circumstances. Signage must be placed at customer and employee entrances and information must be kept up to date.

### Browse

**5) Social Distance.** State and Federal COVID-19 guidelines require a minimum six feet of separation between people for safe interaction. Both large and small stores are challenged by this guideline. While large stores may have the amount of floor space needed to create more generous circulation (e.g., using densely placed displays and stockroom shelving), the loss of display and stock capacity may affect sales. Small stores often have more open sales floor space but very limited stock and back-of-house space. Yet they still may not have the space to provide the safe clearance for sales or back-of-house functions.

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- 6) **Customer Interaction.** The advantage of physical retail versus online is the customer's ability to see, touch, and try products. How will this interaction with the product and sales associate occur in the future, especially for items that are not easily cleaned between interactions such as apparel? The sales associate will become the main filter between the customer and the product. Associates may take on even greater importance and responsibility by displaying and explaining items without customer touching. Will show cases become merely displays while the actual purchased product will come directly from stock untouched? How will fitting rooms be used? Experiments with interactive "smart mirror" technology and computer aided fitting have been taking place for some time now. The pace of development of this technology may accelerate accordingly.

### Purchase

- 7) **Point-of-Sales.** The check-out process may be low-hanging fruit in the adoption of social distancing and touchless practices. Many safe techniques are already being used in grocery stores, including glass barriers between customer and sales associate, card-less or cash-less payment phone apps, and to a lesser extent, self check-out.
- 8) **Buy Online, Pick-up in Store (BOPS).** Most retailers, large and small, have already initiated or established BOPS programs. In this new environment, BOPS spaces and their promotion will likely grow in size and importance. These spaces will also need to adapt to touchless and social distance requirements. They may also expand their scope to deliver the product directly to the customer at the curb (as some stores have done).

### Toilet Facilities

- 9) **Touchless Fixtures** are not new in public restrooms. Most facilities already have hands-free faucets, soap and towel dispensers and water closets. Some fixtures, however, may now be problematic, e.g., forced air hand dryers, which may increase the dispersion of virus droplets. Space for separation may be the greater problem though. Whether a sink or a toilet stall, every other fixture may need to be abandoned, at least temporarily until the crisis passes. At the same time, the number of fixtures is subject to code requirements. Most large stores provide more fixtures than required but existing fixture counts need to be analyzed before decisions are made to abandon. Local code officials should be consulted before fixture reduction. They may be willing to be flexible on fixture count due to the health crisis and the fact that customer volume – the driver of fixture count – will be diminished, at least for the foreseeable future.

### Cost Factors

- 10) **Cost Implications** from adding touchless features must also be considered. Physical modifications cost money. Employees will need regular testing, appropriate equipment and safe practice training based on the type of retail operation and products sold. Patience and understanding will be needed by managers, employees and customers to adjust to new ways of shopping. The initial goal should be to provide for safety, yet hard choices regarding priorities and allocation of capital will need to be made. Communication will be key.

### GOING FORWARD

Large grocery and hardware stores that remained open have learned a great deal through trial-and-error about how to operate under present conditions. Fortunately, these retailers have been transparent in sharing their efforts with the public and retail industry. To confront this crisis, retail professionals will need to improvise, innovate, adapt, listen, learn – and most importantly, cooperate. After all, a phased and cautious opening is better than no opening.