

Navigating packaging trends post-COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic experienced during the past 90 days has been a remarkable event in forcing consumers to do things they normally would not do. In just a short time we have all adjusted to new habits and found creative ways in dealing with restrictions to solve life's daily challenges. Working from home, zoom calls, physical distancing, ordering groceries online, getting haircuts from family members, constant hand washing, wiping surfaces free of germs — just to name a few habits. These have all tested consumer preferences, and some new habits and practices have been born. Yet when the pandemic will be declared to be over, some of these habits and practices will not be rolled back but will remain ongoing in favor of convenience, cost savings and health and safety.

After substantial observation and research, I outline four key trends that will be important to the packaging industry. Will you be ready and prepared to leverage the changes that will occur?

- **Accelerated adoption of e-commerce**

When “stay at home” orders were issued, they positioned a trip to the grocery store as the biggest risk of exposure to the virus. Consumers arrived to find lines at grocery stores and some empty shelves. At the end of this shopping ordeal, they were left with a less-than-satisfied experience.

Many consumers looked for alternative solutions. Consumers who never would imagine grocery shopping online broke traditional shopping habits and tried online grocery shopping for the first time. Contact-less delivery of online grocery shopping was created to reduce exposure and provide a sense of health and safety, and that resonated with consumers. A recent “Brick Meets Click” survey reported 31% of U.S. households used online grocery delivery or pickup service versus 13% one year ago.

Will packaging remain relevant as online shopping gains ground? Packaging will play a bigger and more important role during the second moment of truth. There are new opportunities to consider in how packaging and design offers convenience in use, storage and disposal.

- **Health and safety by killing germs, bacteria and viruses**

It has been made very clear that we all have a role to play in reducing the transmission of the coronavirus. Whether we open common doors, touch grocery carts, enter a public restroom or take back a credit card from a cashier, the surface may be contaminated and transferred to our hands. Hand washing and cleaning surfaces have been emphasized by medical authorities and become part of our shopping routine to rid ourselves of bacteria that we may have picked up and brought home. Consumers want to know that they are safe when shopping or using products. Packaging needs to build trust with consumers that the contents are protected.

- **Sustainability and a place for single-use packaging**

In these days of erring on the side of “health and safety” and an abundance of caution, we see the cities of New York to San Francisco and places in between reversing their bans on single use packaging and prohibiting use of reusables in grocery stores. The fear of contaminated reusable packaging is not only voiced by local governments but also by retailers. Safeway, Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, Meijer, Target and others are not accepting or handling reusable bags in their stores while providing new paper or plastic bags for free.

These efforts are being taken out of extreme safety to avoid viral droplets that may contaminate a surface and become a source of transmission.

This pandemic is not singling out plastics; the ability to dispose of any packaging material that may be contaminated reduces risk of spreading the disease, regardless of the life a virus may last on a material. There are other benefits beyond hygienic for single-use packaging that are now beginning to be rethought in such cases as: right size, right portion, reduction of food waste, convenience, etc. The pandemic is once again raising the conversation of the role of single-use packaging. As the dialogue proceeds on the heels of this pandemic, there will be a rethinking of the greater topic of how we are treating all packaging materials at “end of life.” The statistics are overwhelming in that most recycling of materials ends up in a landfill or is incinerated. It is not plastics that are bad, but how we treat all municipal solid waste that is bad.

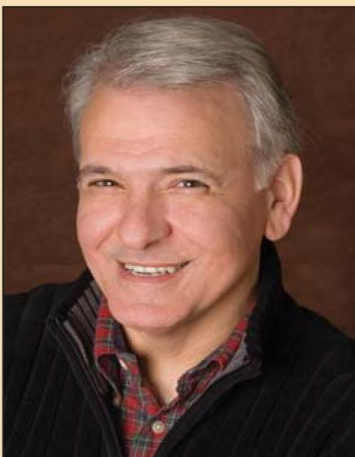
- **Agility through digital production**

Supply chains have been upended during this pandemic, causing major disruptions. Unforeseen changes created chaos in what would have been predictable production and shipment timings. This resulted in shortages in such things as face masks, hand sanitizers, face shields, hospital gowns, ventilators, cell phones, pharmaceuticals, food, etc.

The pandemic made clear that agility and speed to market are important parameters when considering purchase decisions for digital assets. Traditional thinking of analyzing new technology by cost and speed has put printers and converters behind as the world has increased the pace of change. The ability to have self-sufficiency becomes important. Digital provides the ability to make changes through a “click.” This is a time for the package and print industries to rethink their capabilities.

The pandemic should reveal gaps or weak links in your business. It is my message that you take this opportunity to forge ahead to re-evaluate your assets and workflow and invest to become more responsive and seamless. Those that will “lean back” and want to return to business as usual will widen the digital divide. This time of change requires reevaluation of your strategies to become resilient during times of volatility.

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Perspective: Packaging Trends

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