How to Navigate the Post-Covid Landscape

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Covid has altered just about everything it's touched. And it's not done transforming the world just yet. The end of the pandemic may be in sight, but the fallout it caused will be felt well into the future.

After the experiences of 2020, entrepreneurs probably don't require anyone to tell them that. Guidance for navigating the changed business landscape, on the other hand, is much needed. No two industries were impacted by the coronavirus epidemic in the same way, but some common themes are emerging. As you ponder your post-Covid path, consider this advice from four forward-thinking industries that are leading the way:

1. Create the in-person experience online

When the pandemic prompted lockdowns, all kinds of formerly in-person experiences — doctor's visits, eating out and evenings at the multiplex — fell by the wayside. The resulting explosion in telemedicine, curbside pickup and digital streaming seems entirely predictable in retrospect.

Retail was another sector that was hit hard and fast. Stores were forced to close up shop, which resulted in an ecommerce boom for those who could afford to move their operations online and a brick-and-mortar bust for those who could not.

Nor has time made matters much easier. Some states are still limiting retail capacity and many consumers simply aren't looking to go out and shop the way they once were.

The big fix here is to bring the in-person retail experience online. An increasing number of retailers like Macy's, Adidas and Marshall's are experimenting with virtual reality-powered changing rooms that allow customers to see what clothes would look like on them before making their purchases online. As in-person shopping continues its halting return, experiences like these will likely prove to be the next best thing.

2. Adopt tech tools to deal with backlogs

The Great Toilet Paper Shortage of 2020 gave American consumers a more visceral awareness of the global supply chain than they'd likely ever had before. Backlogs and sourcing delays plagued industries ranging from aerospace to meatpacking, but nowhere did these backlogs have more serious consequences than in healthcare.

In an editorial published in *Science*, National Cancer Institute Director Norman Sharpless predicted that delayed screenings and postponed treatments could lead to 10,000 excess cancer deaths in the U.S. over the next decade. To address the pent-up demand for medical testing, elective surgeries and other procedures, the industry is adopting tools that will enable healthcare systems to deal with this backlog with greater efficiency.

Already, such common medical tests as CT and PET scans are being enhanced by machine learning technology, which enables improved diagnosis of a variety of disorders. To detect breast cancer earlier and more accurately while streamlining backlogs, CureMetrix is using an AI-driven mammography method that highlights suspicious cases for a 30% reduction in

reading time and a 27% increase in cancer detection. In industries across the economy, AI-powered tools will be critical to efficiently addressing post-Covid backlogs. In healthcare, they will also save lives.

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3. Prepare for a hybrid future

When the pandemic struck, offices all across the country emptied with a rapidity that made business leaders' heads spin. Many employees embraced working from home, while their employers spotted a money-saving opportunity to revise their space needs downward. Others found that digital whiteboards can't replace in-person collaboration forever and that WFH life is harmful to their mental health.

Related: Businesses Can't Run from Kitchen Tables Forever. Here's Why Coworking Will Make a Comeback.

These countervailing assessments lead to one conclusion: The future of work will be a hybrid of remote and on-premise work. As a high number of commercial office buildings continue to sit entirely or partially empty, the commercial real estate has realized that if it wants to survive, it needs to adapt. And adapt it surely will.

While some businesses have been thoroughly seduced by remote work possibilities, the need for office space persists — albeit at a diminished rate. This presents serious opportunities for coworking spaces that allow businesses a physical outpost without requiring the heavy buy-ins that full office leases do. These kinds of arrangements will be the future of work, so it's up to real estate companies to respond quickly.

4. Refocus on sustainability

For the global sustainability movement, the Covid crisis has been the best of times and the worst of times. Early lockdowns prompted a significant reduction in carbon dioxide emissions and the water in Venice's canals ran clear for the first time in decades. Yet it wasn't long before disposable face masks started washing up on beaches and a tsunami of takeout containers and ecommerce packaging entered the solid waste stream.

While many businesses looked inward, trying simply to stay afloat, others recognized that the threats facing the planet required their action, pandemic or not. In July, Apple announced its plans to achieve a carbon-neutral supply chain by 2030, while ambitious eco-oriented investments by outdoor apparel giant The North Face showed it would no longer cede the sustainability playing field to industry rival Patagonia.

The travel industry is likewise finding that a focus on sustainability offers a way forward. In 2020, Covid all but wiped travel off the schedule for most people. While the urge to explore the world will be greater than ever in 2021 and beyond, there's reason to believe people will be looking to travel differently even then.

The Covid-related lockdowns caused many people to reconnect with nature in new and meaningful ways, opening up the possibility for a more sustainable form of travel to emerge. Organizations like the Center for Responsible Travel are turning typical tourist excursions into opportunities to restore barrier reefs in Belize or foster natural resources stewardship in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. An increasing number of people want in on that kind of action, and it's up to the travel industry to organize it for them.

Related: Why Domestic Travel Looks More Promising in A Post-Pandemic World

The impact of Covid will be felt long after social distancing guidelines and mask mandates expire. Even though a true “post-pandemic” world might still be a ways away, there’s a lot to be hopeful for – and a lot of ways businesses can adapt and thrive.

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