Preparing E-Commerce for the Post-COVID Bounce Back

COVID-19 has switched up life as we know it, and it’s unlikely to stop doing so for some time.

E-commerce shopping is a perfect example of how things have changed, and in a number of ways.

If you feel like Shopify has been dropping huge, disruptive news bombs practically each week now, you’re right!

And who’d have guessed that in the UK, the exclusively online supermarket, Ocado, is now worth more than brick-and-mortar grocers Morrisons, Sainsbury’s, and Marks and Spencer combined.

The speed of transformation in e-commerce since the COVID-19 outbreak (an already fast-paced industry) has been savage.

Supply chains are under strain for many brands selling online (especially where demand is high and supplies are low). How do you best manage expectations and maximize every opportunity to sell to your target audience?

With your consumers now relying on the world of online shopping more than ever, how can you be sure you’re getting your fair share of that online retail pie?

Well, this post is designed to help you answer precisely these questions. Whether your sales have taken a hit or you have “off the wall” levels of demand, here are some ideas to help you navigate that bounce back and to help customers stay in love with your brand.

Pay close attention to changing on site search behavior

Your site search is a goldmine of insight, especially right now. Seriously.

Frequently checking in to understand how and what your customers are looking for once they get to your store can reveal a bunch of opportunities.

It’s possible that before COVID-19 took a stronghold on everyday life, customers had different contexts in mind when searching for your products.

For example, searches for “gloves” today vs. in January are likely to be visitors searching for two separate products entirely. It’s important to ensure that you’re serving today’s customer sufficiently and addressing their context correctly to remain relevant and to improve conversion.

Here’s an extreme example, but it’s a poignant one nonetheless. For context, Holland and Barrett are a popular, high street healthcare retailer with a strong web presence here in the UK.

When searches for “coronavirus” had skyrocketed and demand for hand sanitizer and Paracetamol (another brand of acetaminophen, like Tylenol) were painfully high, what I found

incredible was that searching for “coronavirus” on their website yielded no results.

This seemed particularly jarring for a retailer that, first, sells items that have been scientifically proven to kill and help prevent the spread of the virus and, second, is a dedicated healthcare business.

Not only does this throw a huge wrench in the works when it comes to CX and customer perception, this tiny yet costly oversight is likely to have cost them sales and customers too.

Customers are also searching for products that aren’t typically associated with a certain brand or online store due to exhausted stocks elsewhere.

For example, the top three search terms for one of my e-commerce clients are now “Mask”, “mask”, and “PPE”. The search terms “mask”, “PPE”, and close variants were practically non-existent prior to mid-May.

Kit and Ace, a clothing retailer, has responded to precisely this changing behavior. After seeing a huge spike in the number of site searches for masks, they’re now introducing a new, premium, scientifically-derived mask that also fits their brand. They’re donating 100% of profits from the masks, but

this tactic will likely to drive more sales in their other categories too.

This is a great move, especially since apparel sales have shrunk during this time. It’s important to find emerging opportunities when typical product lines are no longer in demand.

The point I’m trying to make here is that, in order to succeed coming out of the other side of this pandemic, you need to ensure you’re fully in tune with the wants and needs of today’s customer – whatever that looks like for you. Using site search can absolutely give you a huge window into their demands and interests.

If products are out of stock, offer excellent alternatives (where possible)

As touched on earlier, supply chain management is going to be increasingly challenging – especially in areas where demand is outstripping supply – yet so many retailers miss out here.

For some products, it doesn’t matter how hard you try, every retailer has them listed as “out of stock.”

For branded items that have stock issues globally, being the retailer that offers a perfectly good alternative could be enough to win over that visitor and win the sale that other retailers have lost.

To use a specific example, FTX is a manufacturer of radio-controlled cars, and is a brand sold on Europe e-commerce site Wheelspin. There’s an FTX item that you cannot get before the end of June (for love nor money) on any website due to COVID-19. The pandemic has forced factories to close and that disrupts production for many goods.

Specifically, in this example, it’s the FTX brushed motor that’s become victim to supply chain issues. However, there’s a brand that has a perfectly suitable alternative item that’s identical in specification, and it’s in stock:

Proactively offering solid alternatives with as few

compromises as possible can be a great way of winning sales and delighting customers in a way that your competitors likely won’t be.

Add an “in stock only” filter

Continuing on the topic of store stock and managing a turbulent supply chain, a simple but welcome feature is to add an “items in stock” filter.

It goes without saying that allowing customers to browse items they’re able to get their hands on quickly will go down well and could help improve conversion on your website.

Another benefit of adding such a filter is the ability to bring light to other lines that are typically overshadowed by more popular (but now out of stock) items.

Taking this a step further, you could also help your customers experience by adding a filter for products expected to arrive within a certain timeframe, or filter out those that can be backordered.

Add an “email me when back in stock” CTA

If you’re a retailer struggling to get stock of popular lines, there’s a good chance you’re not the only retailer with that problem. Although it may not be possible to get stock any quicker than your competitors, you can absolutely ensure that you’re the first to let potential customers know that it’s back in stock.

Sweeten the deal by personalizing the back-in-stock email

Letting a potential customer know that the item’s back in

stock is great, but why not suprise and delight your customers by taking the opportunity to personalize this email too?

Offering personalized cross-sells of the item that's now back in stock can be a great way to not only give them the good news, but give them additional reasons to visit your shop and potentially increase basket value simultaneously. It's certainly a win, win here.

Remarket to people when items are back in stock

People are spending more time online – fact. So it makes sense to reach your audience where they're most likely to be spending time for the foreseeable future.

Depending on the popularity of an item (and how much traffic is going to it whilst it's remained unavailable), you could create a retargeting list based on visitors that expressed an interest in it now that it's back in stock.

This can prove to be a great way to reach people, say on social media, that aren't particularly responsive to email but are spending increased amounts of time on their favorite social platforms.

Although this may not be scalable, or at least I haven't found a way to make it so, doing this across your top-selling lines or lines with greater margins could prove to be a successful way of pulling engaged and semi-invested visitors back to your site.

Don't be afraid to increase prices where necessary

Let's not forget the basic principles of commerce, right? High demand (coupled with low supply) increases prices.

Businesses shouldn’t feel guilty for increasing prices, but of course, there’s a difference between a justifiable increase and straight ripping people off (as demonstrated below):

For context, four tins of 400g Heinz Spaghetti Plus Sausage would retail at around £4 in UK supermarkets (that’s about $5 at current exchange rates).

Think about this scenario for a second: You and your staff are potentially working in environments that could pose serious health risks. Plus there’s additional costs to consider in order to keep people safe. PPE, cleaning products, masks, sick pay for unwell staff, etc., all these factors will push up the cost per sale and erode your margins.

Equally, there are no guarantees right now. Those all-time high levels of sales could come slamming to a fierce halt at any time. Whether that’s caused by a change in demand, decrease in stock, or your business is no longer able to fulfil orders due to an internal COVID-19 outbreak.

Increasing prices fairly to better protect your business against these mostly uncontrollable factors is not a bad thing. In my opinion, it’s just good business sense.

You've got to ensure your business is as robust as it can be when faced with these potential eventualities. Increasing your prices fairly can help to better protect it.

Discover creative ways to connect with your audience

As the saying goes, "when life gives you lemons, make lemonade". It's a huge cliché, but it absolutely rings true and remains a powerful statement today.

Finding ways to be creative, cut through the noise, and engage with your audience is essential to staying relevant. Especially if your customer's cash is heading elsewhere right now.

Here's an example of a potentially powerful idea that I've been working on for a client in the world of apparel – one of the more fiercely affected industries during the pandemic.

People are spending less on fashion, and even less at the luxury end of the scale. So, why not let your audience build themselves a virtual dream wardrobe? Something they'd consider buying for a night out, things they'd have in their suitcase for a summer vacation, etc. It's a fairly simple idea, but let's think about the impact this could have for both customer and business:

You're throwing down a few slices of "feel good"So many people miss going out, right? Heading to bars, clubs, celebrating a milestone, going on a vacation, or even just getting back to the office, so many of us associate buying new outfits as part of those moments.

Allowing your loyal fans and customers to pick out their money's-no-object dream outfits based on some predetermined wardrobes (office attire, night out, summer holiday) is naturally going to invoke some positive emotions and memories

– especially if you inject a social element into it by allowing people to share their collections.

But other wins can be extracted from such an idea too:

You're collecting valuable user data: You're getting some valuable insight into the sort of clothing people may buy when lockdown policies begin to wind back. This could help to get a better understanding of demand so you can work on reinvigorating your supply chain successfully.

Plus, you're getting an idea of what items visitors would put together to help educate new fashion trends and inform "recommended for you" personalization.

You're helping to alleviate boredom: In some ways, this kind of activity is adding an element of gamification to apparel. With so many people stuck indoors experiencing high levels of procrastination and boredom, it can help to cut through and detach from the realities of lockdown.

You're creating an opportunity to welcome sales when things pick back up:

Offering an incentive (say 15% off your dream collections) once we're on the cusp of restoring "normality" could be a really powerful way of encouraging and helping to re-energize apparel and fashion spend online. It's also a great way to celebrate the comeback.

Last but not least, you're building brand affinity: I've said it before, but it's extremely important, so I'll say it again: remaining relevant and keeping marketing efforts up is essential to ensure you remain in good shape when society heads towards the new normal.

Having your audience resonate with your brand and remember your positive actions whilst they're away will be a major influence on your ability to maintain and deepen those

customer relationships post-pandemic.

Final thoughts: the rise of big brands diving into D2C eCommerce

What’s amazing to see is a huge move by big household names and brands. They’re now setting up their own direct-to-consumer (D2C) e-commerce outfits, and on the surface, appear to be going head-to-head with supermarkets.

To highlight a few of my favorite examples, there’s snacks.com – created by Frito-Lay – shipping their brand’s snacking staples across North America.

Then there’s Heinz to Home, delivering popular Heinz products to households in the UK.

How these new D2C e-commerce brands fare in the long term will be interesting to see, but what’s certain is the pandemic is accelerating and evolving e-commerce in a way that’s not been seen before.

As a final note, to those of you hit hard by COVID-19, may I wish you a speedy recovery – personally and professionally.

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