



PREPARING RETAIL WORKFORCES FOR ANYTHING

Retailers certainly have learned this year that they must be prepared to react quickly and efficiently to unforeseen scenarios, and that applies to the workforce as much as any other facet of store operations. The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed how consumers shop, the way stores function and the roles of store associates. Being able to quickly identify changes and adapt to the demands they bring makes a strong workforce management solution more important than ever.

The year began with the longest economic expansion on record, unemployment at a 50-year low and the [National Retail Federation](#) forecasting 4% sales growth. Then the coronavirus pandemic hit the scene: markets crashed, most businesses were ordered to close and millions of people were thrown out of work. Retail sales plummeted, iconic retailers were forced into bankruptcy and thousands of smaller retailers were devastated.

“We are in uncharted territory,” Dave Loat, president of workforce management solutions provider StoreForce, told clients early in the pandemic. “But that doesn’t mean there aren’t some rules or some guidelines.”

StoreForce knew its clients needed help. While “essential” retailers like supermarkets, drug stores and big box stores remained open, smaller “non-essential” retailers closed shop for an indefinite amount of time. StoreForce works exclusively with specialty retailers, such as Crate and Barrel, Shoe Palace and Groupe Dynamite, and at the peak of the pandemic, all of StoreForce’s clients’ stores were ordered closed. Clothing stores alone saw sales cut in half in March, while other specialty stores were down by a quarter, according to the [Census Bureau](#).

StoreForce began gathering data and developing strategies to handle challenges from how to sell

online while stores were closed to how to prepare for reopening. As the pandemic unfolded, StoreForce began offering advice and compiled [COVID-19 Store Reopenings: Resources for Retailers](#) on how to survive.

With the pandemic affecting every aspect of retailing, StoreForce realized its WFM+ workforce management solution could play a key role. The comprehensive, end-to-end system offers real-time tools specialty retailers rely on to optimize labor spending, manage store and employee performance and increase employee engagement.

During the pandemic, its employee self-service module has helped retailers call back furloughed workers, communicate new rules and procedures, and even check the health status of employees before they clock in. Its task management system helps assign duties like store sanitizing, complete with photos to prove compliance. Its analytics capabilities have allowed StoreForce to create metrics such as “capacity turn” and track “visit value” when regulations limit the number of customers in a store.

CHANGING SHOPPER HABITS

While incidents from East Coast hurricanes to California wildfires can close a portion of stores for a short period, the pandemic has been different. For many companies, all stores were ordered closed for an extended time. Most importantly, stay-at-home orders created fears that have changed consumer behavior in ways prior disasters did not. Those changes have altered retail significantly, and Loat says, “all signs indicate that some of those changes are here to stay.”

One of the biggest changes has been rapid acceleration of online shopping and an expanded role for stores in digital transactions.

[Second-quarter online sales](#) skyrocketed 45% year-over-year, more than triple the rate seen a year earlier, according to the Census Bureau, jumping from 11% of total retail sales to a record 16%. NRF says [59% of consumers plan to shop online even more this holiday season](#).

[Buy online, pick up in-store orders were up 563% year-over-year in April](#), according to Kibo Commerce, with NRF reporting that 38% of shoppers used BOPIS specifically because of self-quarantining and social distancing.

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— **DAVE LOAT**,
President, StoreForce





IN AN OMNI WORLD, STORES ARE “MARKETPLACES”

With the increased role in digital transactions COVID-19 has brought to bricks-and-mortar, it is essential to think of stores as marketplaces.

“In the world of omnichannel, the bricks-and-mortar retail store remains your single most important brand touchpoint,” StoreForce President Dave Loat says.

“The digital activity happening in a market is either directly or indirectly related to the store and, in many cases, part of the transaction still happens at the store level. The bricks-and-mortar store remains a key, critical part of your perception by the consumer.”

StoreForce Managing Director for Europe Chris Noble says opening a new store typically boosts surrounding online sales 30%. Noble recommends key steps to developing a “stores as markets” strategy:

- Think of each store as the hub of a geographic area, attribute digital sales in that marketplace to the store, and credit the store for activities that support online business.
- Understand stores’ capacity to support demands such as online chat, ship-from-store or online returns, and predict less-busy times when employees can balance those duties and traditional duties.
- Encourage employee engagement, have the best people working at the busiest times and reward top performers.

Also fueling changes in shopper patterns was that consumers began working from home or were furloughed. In the spring, weekends lost up to a third of foot traffic, once-slow weekdays became busier and the curve between the two flattened. “Every day is a weekend day,” Loat says of shopping early on during the pandemic.

The places where shoppers feel comfortable shopping also have changed. Street stores, once on retailers’ next-to-close list, have become location darlings while mall locations have seen rapid declines.

“They might not be ready to go into a mall,” says Shawn Higdon, vice president of operations at footwear retailer Shoe Palace. But customers are thinking, “If I can get out of my car and walk right in and buy it and then walk right back to my car, I’m a little more comfortable.”

StoreForce clients reported foot traffic initially off up to 50% year-over-year, with sales down almost 30%. By fall, however, traffic was still off by a third, but sales were within a percentage point of 2019.

“Any customer that is walking into your store right now is probably on a mission to buy,” says Neela Montgomery, former CEO of Crate and Barrel.

“They’re not just browsing.”

With conversion and basket sizes up, retailers have shifted from prolonging customer visits to providing a safe, quick and efficient stop to enhance “visit value” for retailers and customers alike.

A SHIFT IN SCHEDULING

Changes in consumer behavior mean changes in how retailers deploy staff. Busier weekdays mean scheduling changes. A greeter may now be asked to remind customers to wear masks or dispense sanitizer. Employees need to be assigned to constant cleaning, and someone must count customers to comply with capacity guidelines. BOPIS, curbside pickup or fulfill-from-store can mean reassigning staff, hiring new workers or “pooling” employees from nearby stores to find the right skills. And what happens when an employee doesn’t have the coronavirus but has a cough that worries customers?

Those issues make flexibility more important than ever. Among other implications, retailers may need to relax rules on how much notice workers give before changing schedules – and work with government officials in areas where state or local rules penalize employers if they are the ones to change schedules.

CONCLUSION: HOW DO COVID-19 LESSONS APPLY?

"No one could have properly prepared for COVID the first time around," Loat says. "But now that we've gone through the experience" retailers need to consider "what would you have liked to have had in place before this happened?"

One likelihood is increased e-commerce capability, with Loat saying specialty retailers are likely to move toward a 50/50 mix of online and in-store sales to minimize lost revenue if stores close again. "Retailers will be better equipped to address what comes next, and [be] more agile and nimble in embracing the challenges," Loat explains.

Marie-Soleil Tremblay, senior vice president of sales and operations at fashion retailer Groupe Dynamite, agrees. "COVID-19 has taught us to be really, really agile," she noted during a recent StoreForce [webinar](#). ■



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ABOUT STOREFORCE

StoreForce has been helping Specialty Retailers exceed sales performance goals and deliver exceptional customer experiences since 2010. Our WFM+ approach provides a full suite of store scheduling, timekeeping, performance, and execution tools that keep everyone focused on what matters most – *the customer.*

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