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Crisis and uncertainty! Brave new retail world - by Carol Todreas

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A new norm is coming: one that means shifting and changing on a dime. If medical experts are correct, then, as of this writing, social/physical distancing will be with us for approximately 12 to 18 more months, with periods of strict and less strict isolation depending on the number of COVID-19 cases and hospital care capability at a given time. Stores and gathering places will have to be prepared to open and shut down on relatively short notice into the future--another major challenge and disruption to the world of retail.

While pandemics have changed the world throughout history, stores and restaurants in one form or another have managed to endure. They will emerge from this crisis, but we don't yet know how and when.

Here is what we do know. Before COVID-19, four trends dominated the retail scene:

1. New internet retailers were entering brick and mortar to get to know and bond with their customers.
2. Department stores were exploring different concepts to meet their customers' needs.
3. Malls and shopping centers were eliminating tired tenants and re-vitalizing their real estate by introducing other complementary uses and reconfiguring themselves into town centers.
4. Rents in high demand urban areas were on the way to becoming too high resulting in large-scale vacancies.

Now, these developments have almost vanished, and all retail is in survival mode, scurrying around still in a state of shock.

When the dust settles, there will be some major changes on the retail landscape. In the meantime, consider some basic measures:

1. Keep in touch with your customers by email, text, and phone calls. Show them you appreciate their loyalty by offering special services like curbside delivery.
2. Foster close relationships among landlords and tenants for rent abatement and other assistance needed during this period.
3. Plan for an uncertain future regarding supply chains. Find local suppliers, merchandise control, and types of inventory that is responsive to our new semi-isolated lifestyle.
4. Strengthen town commercial centers so that walking and biking are easier, services for home-workers are increased, leases are flexible, and living arrangements are created where density and health are balanced.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, goods were fewer, services were greater, shopping was pleasurable. Supply could not meet demand. Is that where we are headed? Maybe.

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