

Adapting to

THE NEW CLEAN

5 Ways to Evolve Your Brand Strategy
in Today's World

Key Findings and Takeaways from The Hot Seat

MATERIAL+

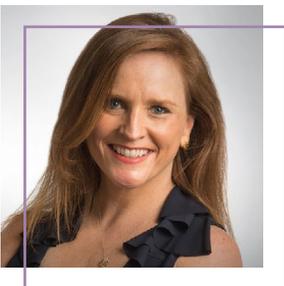


It's clear that for the foreseeable future brands must continue adapting and innovating, with no "new normal" arriving anytime soon. To guide our clients through these changes, our new digital event series brings together some of the sharpest strategists from across Material and its roster of clients, hosting research-driven discussions on topics that matter right now. Our goal? To spark new thinking and inspire innovative strategies to help teams and brands of all kinds navigate these complicated times. That's what The Hot Seat is all about.



For our first session, we focused on Americans' evolving habits, behaviors, and attitudes around cleanliness and sanitation. The conversation featured:

- **Ben Gaddis** (CEO of [T3](#))
- **Cary Bainbridge** (CMO of [ABM](#))
- **Luci Rainey** (CMO of [PODS](#))
- **Gareth Schweitzer** (CEO of [Kelton](#) and President of [Material's](#) Action Division)



In this report, we'll share the most important and actionable takeaways from their discussion.



American consumers have higher expectations for the brands they choose than for themselves when it comes to protecting customers from COVID-19.

Overcoming a global pandemic requires collective action and sacrifice—but consumers believe it's brands that should be doing the heaviest lifting. According to our survey, **75%** of consumers wouldn't give up TV and streaming services for a month to guarantee that every store or restaurant they visit is free of COVID-19. Meanwhile, **40%** think stores should ensure that people wear masks rather than leaving it to individual responsibility — and over half (**53%**) think stores should be expected to provide masks to customers. Fair or not, this means your brand needs to step up.



When you ask people to do things that take fifteen steps, they're not going to do them. But, at the right moment within an experience, you can ask them to do something with one or two steps.

— Ben Gaddis



STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS:

- **Understand how the customer journey has changed — and then simplify it as much as possible.** The ways consumers shop have changed dramatically: restricted store capacities, online pre-ordering, contactless pickups and deliveries, appointment-only shopping, outdoor haircuts, the list goes on. Customer journeys have become more complicated than ever. Your brand must conduct the right research to deeply understand these changes, and use the insights you glean to minimize new frictions. Uncover and solve new customer pain points. Find ways to make customer requirements as easy on your shoppers as possible.
- **Make customer safety expectations and sacrifices crystal clear in your communications.** Even after you've done everything in your power to make your customers' lives easier,

there will still be certain requirements expected of them, whether that's wearing a mask, maintaining social distancing, consenting to a temperature check, etc. Make these expectations clear in all relevant customer-facing communications so people know ahead of time what their particular responsibilities will be. Similarly, make sure you're communicating any well-liked aspects of your brand experience that must be sacrificed in the name of safety. If your brand is beloved for its face-to-face customer service, for instance, your audiences might not be happy with a pivot to a contactless approach. But if you're open and honest about why some changes have been made, those consumers are more likely to be understanding and stay loyal to your brand.

Brand trust is being tested in a big way right now — but consumers will reward the right response to our current crisis.

2



Our research shows that **75%** of Americans are more likely to shop at stores that are taking the most health and safety measures. If they feel they can trust you to keep them safe, people will reward your brand with their business. But that means you really have to earn that trust — to do what it takes to ensure customers feel comfortable going to your store or engaging with your brand.



The time to build trust is now — because this isn't the first crisis, and it's not going to be the last.

— Cary Bainbridge

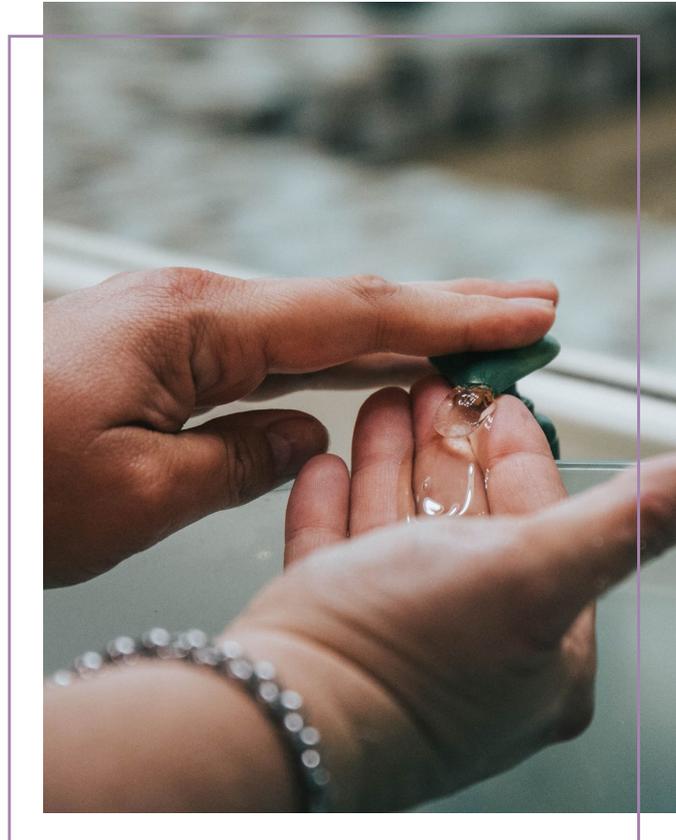


STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS:

- **Make sure your efforts are visible when creating clean and healthy spaces.** Lean in to the scrutiny and prove that you're going above and beyond. Communicate any new steps employees are taking to protect shoppers. Make it clear how you're disinfecting high-touch areas. Create signage to guide people to do the right things to stay safe. It's not enough that you know you're doing everything right — your customers need to know too.
- **Be authentic and transparent in your communication.** The same thing goes for interacting with customers outside the context of the store: be honest, and don't be afraid to over communicate. It's more important than ever to connect with your audiences on a deeply human level. Show them that you're taking responsibility for their long-term wellbeing.

3 Don't assume heightened consumer expectations will go away once COVID-19 does.

As much as it might feel like a fantasy, this pandemic will eventually be over, and it will be safe to gather in groups again. We'll be able to go to concerts, ball games, and movies. But that doesn't mean things will go back to the way they were before the spread of the virus. Americans' habits are changing. We're washing our hands almost **twice as much** as we were pre-COVID, for instance (from an average of 6 times per day to 10). And just as some Americans' new hygiene habits will continue in a post-pandemic world, so too will their expectations around the brands they choose.



*We're definitely making **long-term** changes right now in how we communicate with customers.*

— *Luci Rainey*



STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS:

- **Don't think of your COVID-response strategies purely as short-term solutions.** The enhanced cleaning and disinfection measures you've put into place this year could continue to be differentiators for years to come. COVID-19 has forced us all to confront the fact that pandemics are not a relic of the past, and even a coronavirus vaccine won't necessarily ease anxiety around a future outbreak. As you develop plans for the future, make room for **future insights and strategy work** that will help you determine — and deliver on — the needs of tomorrow's customers.

Deeply understanding your customers is more important than ever before.

4



COVID-19 has created entirely new ways to categorize consumers into groups. Take **fear**, for instance. The different levels of fear shoppers feel around the pandemic will dictate their shopping habits and preferences, what their customer journeys look like, the messaging they'll respond to — you get the idea. Or **geography**: the differences between markets have always mattered, of course, but they have the power to create entirely disparate experiences now. Someone who lives in New York City is facing very different shopping and public health environments than someone living in the suburban Midwest.

STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS:

- **Do your research earlier — so that you have it when you need it.** This time last year, nobody was actively preparing for a pandemic. But once brands were forced to invent new ways of doing business on the fly, the need for deep customer insights quickly became clear. We're not saying you need to anticipate every crisis, but you do have to understand the detailed characteristics and drivers of your various customer groups. That's how you'll be able to meet their needs even in a volatile situation. Of course, that's only useful advice for the next catastrophe. If you're still struggling *now*, don't wait to conduct the necessary research to understand your customer groups in the context of our current moment.

5 Deeply understanding your employees is *also* more important than ever before.

Our research found that **76%** of Americans respect essential healthcare workers more than they used to, and **75%** report respecting essential retail workers more than they used to. Clearly, consumers have recognized the sacrifices these people have made during an incredibly difficult time, and will be more likely to buy from brands that go the extra mile in protecting their employees. All of which points to the fact that what it means to manage a brand has changed: the job now involves thinking about how to properly protect employees.

Moving forward, does COVID-19 reset permanently the expectations people have of employers in keeping employees well?

— Gareth Schweitzer

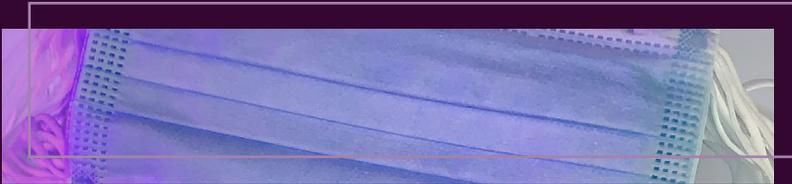


STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS:

- **Dimensionalize your workforce.** In the same way you need to deeply understand your different customer groups, so too must you understand the varying needs and drivers of different employee groups. Conduct internal research to understand the daily experience of workers across geographies. If your goal in the future is to keep your employees safe from the minute they step out their front door, for example, you'll need to understand which employees use public transportation and which don't, which must use elevators and which don't have to, etc. Again, you'll see major differences between employees in New York and those in the Midwest. And that's an easy example — the more you know, the more you'll be able to provide the kinds of tailored protections that actually keep people safe (and in turn earn brand loyalty).

Material is a modern marketing services company, powered by analytics, deep human understanding, and design thinking.

Inspired to take action? [Get in touch.](#)



Study details: 6-minute survey fielded to n=1213 Americans August 11-12. Quotas set to reflect the general population of adults age 18+.

MATERIAL+