



Can Behavioural Science provide insights into post-COVID-19 consumer behaviour?



Owain Service
Consultant
Finsbury

One of the most obvious impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the disruptive effect it has had upon our daily lives. Very often this has come with hugely negative side-effects. People have lost their businesses, been furloughed, and had to adapt working practices to incorporate social distancing. Those more fortunate have been able to work from home, conduct meetings virtually, and started buying everything from online stores. In short, whether for good or ill, we have all had to rapidly adopt new habits; and these new routines have given our days a new rhythm.

So what chance that these new habits, both the good and the bad, stick? To answer this question we need to understand how habits are created. Habits are formed when we regularly repeat behaviours in a consistent context over a period of time. This repetition turns behaviours that might have previously required our active attention into more automatic responses to our daily routines or environment. Brushing your teeth every night before you go to bed isn't something that we do innately. It is a learned habit. So is your daily commute to work, your lunchtime routine, or doing the weekly shop. The more these routines are repeated in a consistent context, the more likely they are to stick. And the more automatic our responses become.

What Covid-19 has done, uniquely in many of our lifetimes, has been to disrupt the consistent contexts in which many of our habits were made manifest. And this has created the environment in which new routines and practices have emerged. So the key to understanding whether they will stick is to understand which of these new routines will themselves be disrupted as we ease out of the lockdown. In some areas, this will likely require companies to take active decisions to maintain those behaviours that are now seen as positive. Companies and businesses, for example, can emphasise that virtual meetings are the new 'default' mode of communication; and ensure that individuals are not encouraged to travel across continents to have a face-to-face meeting.

In many other areas of everyday life, similar changes are taking place which are likely to stick even without the active interventions of companies. We are already seeing this in the consumer sector where recent retail company results are seemingly indicating a rapid shift to online. Hennes and Mauritz, the world's second-biggest fashion retailer, saw 'muted' trade in-store in the markets that have begun to open up since last month, whereas online sales increased almost a third between March and May. Zalando, Europe's biggest online-only fashion retailer, added 39% more new customers in April 2020 than they did in April 2019.

Even as shops begin reopening, and despite some of the queues we have seen in the first days of the easing of the lockdown, it is likely that there will be no 'back to normal' or return to old habits. More likely is that, across swathes of the economy, we will see the seismic events of the last few months having a profound effect upon our behaviours. And a set of new habits and practices, developed through the lockdown, will become the new normal for employees and consumers across the globe.

Owain Service is Consultant at Finsbury, advising its clients on how behavioural science can be utilised in their communications strategies. He is the former Deputy Director of the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, and MD and co-founder of the Behavioural Insights Team, which was originally set up within the UK Cabinet Office to apply behavioural insights theory to inform the communication and delivery of government policy.



LONDON

The Adelphi | 1-11 John Adam Street | London | United Kingdom WC2N 6HT
+44 (0)20 7251 3801 | enquiries-uk@finsbury.com

www.finsbury.com