

PR and Retail Media Trends 2021

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Access Intelligence Plc

The Johnson Building,
79 Hatton Garden
London
EC1N 8AW

Tel: +44 (0) 203 426 4070

Email: info@vuelio.com **Website:** vuelio.com

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1. Introduction

1.1 This report covers:

- **The impact of coronavirus on the UK retail sector and the lasting effects of lockdown on consumers**
- **Lessons from lockdown and catering to the new 'empowered' customer**
- **Trends that will shape future retail PR and communications campaigns**
- **Tips from those in the retail PR space for connecting with a changed consumer landscape**

2020 was a difficult yet transformative year for UK retail. As lockdowns were put into place across the country, shoppers were forced to switch to online shopping solutions for their food, fashion, entertainment, technology – everything that was possible to purchase digitally.

This naturally had an impact on physical stores and experiences - in the first half of 2020, 11,000 outlets were closed according to research from The Local Data Company and PWC¹ –double the amount of outlet closures as the same time last year.

Long-established brands and dependable shopping mainstays also struggled. Debenhams' 118 physical stores and online business were bought out by Boohoo for £55million in early 2021. The 242-year-old brand's remaining 12 physical stores were then closed in mid-May². And Arcadia Group collapsed in late 2020,³ with store closures reaching into 2021 before the Group's brands were bought by Asos for £330m.⁴ The high street is forever changed. Already vastly different visually, it will need to evolve even further to welcome customers back in through physical doors. Yet, online retail also needs to evolve and improve, with customers expecting high levels of service when it comes to quality, security, delivery and overall brand experience.

We've gathered expertise from those working on the front lines of retail, in public relations, comms and research to report on the current state of the sector, what trends will need to be factored into campaigns for brands looking to recapture and retain the modern post-pandemic consumer and how to navigate recovery, both in-person and online.

Planning for recovery and uncertain challenges is just part of what Vuelio⁵ provides for over 3,000 organisations across the world that use our products for monitoring, insight, engagement and evaluation of the political, editorial and social media landscape. We're part of the Access Intelligence Group that includes the ResponseSource⁶ network that connects media and influencers to the resources they need and audience insights and social listening platform Pulsar.⁷ With this report, we hope to aid you further in planning for recovery and making the most of the upcoming opportunities for retail.

1.2 Lessons from lockdown: a changed retail landscape

Retail was already undergoing vast transformation before the COVID-19 pandemic and first UK lockdown in March 2020. Arguably, lockdown only sped up what was already happening on the high street, with many long-established retail stores having closed due to consumer bases moving to start-up and disruptor brands or the comparative ease of shopping online.

Source: <https://pressreleases.responsesource.com/news/100738/61-of-uk-consumers-foresee-the-end-of-the-high-street/>

²Source: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/money/final-12-debenhams-stores-shut-24111094>

³Source: <https://www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2021/01/arcadia-administration-update-714-job-cuts-31-store-closures/>

⁴Source: <https://thestudentlawyer.com/2021/02/02/asoss-acquisition-of-arcadia-group-the-changing-face-of-uk-retail/>

⁵Source: <https://www.vuelio.com/uk/>

⁶Source: <https://www.responsesource.com/>

⁷Source: <https://www.pulsarplatform.com/>

1.3 **Christmas 2020: a snapshot of things to come?**

The festive season, traditionally a time of packed shopping streets and higher profits for physical stores was very different for Christmas 2020 – in PCI Pal's survey of 2,000 shoppers,⁸ 30% said that their gift shopping would have typically taken place in-stores, though only 17% actually utilised physical stores as their primary source of purchases.

Instead, 64% favoured online, with 9% preferring mobile apps for purchases. Only 8% of UK consumers said they would return to shopping in-store versus digital channels after COVID-19.

The purchasing public are concerned for the future of in-store shopping, according to KIS Finance's survey of 1,000 UK consumers in December 2020,⁹ which found that 61% of those polled believe the high street will disappear completely in the next ten years due to the ever-increasing number of big-name store closures.

1.4 **Self-care: a must-have for consumers during difficult times**

Traditional purchasing patterns made way for new consumer behaviours through the year, causing difficulty for some sectors and opportunity for others. The focus on health, fitness and self-care during lockdowns 1 through 3 in the UK meant gym closures, but higher interest in working out at home and, as a result, new home fitness equipment.

Arvy Andres, director of London-based fitness equipment retailer *Gymzey*, saw his business grow throughout the pandemic year, introducing over 300 new product titles as demand rose for equipment able to be used in smaller home spaces and gardens including dumbbells, barbells and resistance bands. While business slowed during the reopening of gyms in April of this year, May saw demand rise once more as people returned to work and summer weather began to arrive.

Whether preferences for home fitness versus gym membership continue as plans for the relaxation of lockdown this year continues remains to be seen, but there is no doubt that the motivations and preferences of the buying public have been changed by not only the financial strains of the pandemic, but the extra time at, and connection to, home.

1.5 **Shopping online now comes with higher expectations**

With more people having experienced the positives and negatives of shopping online – ease and opportunity during lockdown versus the potential of slow delivery, bad service or products of lower quality – the expectations of online customers are now much higher.

According to data from FM Outsource's analysis of the retail sector¹⁰ in March of this year, 64% of consumers do over half of their shopping online – 83.78% of those surveyed said that poor customer service would stop them using a retailer in the future, with 90% believing customer service is more important than ever in 2021. Worryingly, one in five customers find online customer service poor or unhelpful.

2021 consumers want easy communication as part of their online shopping experience – more than 30% of customers expect digital retailers to have a live chat function, and two-thirds of respondents to the FM Outsource survey want a live chat response within 90 minutes.

'Retail businesses are at a tipping point, fuelled by new market pressures and new opportunities to understand and anticipate customer needs', is how Boomi's⁹ sales director, EMEA South Fabio Invernizzi puts it.¹¹

⁸Source: <https://pressreleases.responsesource.com/news/100598/online-shoppers-more-concerned-about-deliveries-than-personal-security-according/>

⁹Source: <https://www.kisbridgingloans.co.uk/finance-news/61-percent-of-uk-consumers-foresee-the-end-of-the-high-street/>

¹⁰Source: <https://fmoutsource.com/resources/re-examining-retail-white-paper/>

¹¹Source: <https://boomi.com/content/video/demo/10min>

¹²Source: <https://pressreleases.responsesource.com/news/101254/major-european-retail-distributor-accelerates-digital-transformation-with-boomi-and/>

'Today's connected consumer wants a highly personalised, frictionless experience across every channel, making time-to-value critical for retailers to roll out new products and services, and rapidly address competitive pressures and customer expectations.'

Those who haven't caught up with this expectation of flexibility with reliability from the online brands they interact with and buy from could lose trust, engagement and, eventually, profits.

1.6 **Empowered customers demand higher value, wherever they buy from**

With traditionally high-street-based retail brands developing an online presence alongside emerging digital brands, greater choice for consumers means higher expectations all-round. Value is what can make the difference.

For Cirkle's¹³ managing partner of consumer brands Kate Gibson, this has been particularly clear in the supermarket sector: 'In a highly-competitive, price-sensitive market, grocery retailers are facing the challenge of addressing changing definitions of consumer value.'

'Value is still the number one driver of store choice but consumers increasingly expect retailers to deliver above and beyond, asking questions such as "how does it change my life?" or "what is the value to society?"'

'Our campaigns this year will be led by this understanding of the changing face of consumer value, ensuring that we act as "customer champions" and deliver communications which demonstrate a brand's sense of purpose.'

1.7 **Upcoming challenges and opportunity for recovery**

While nothing is certain when it comes to economic recovery for the retail sector, from recreation to restaurants, patterns picked up during the lifting of each lockdown in the UK point to upcoming areas of potential struggle but also opportunity.

Encoded's¹⁴ Rob Crutchington sees links¹⁵ between today's retail climate and that of the 'Roaring Twenties', a time of consumer boom in the UK and the US following the Spanish Flu and the economic and emotional drain of war: 'Just as companies adjusted to the increase in online purchasing during the pandemic, now is the time to prepare as customers start to spend again with a new-found confidence.'

Whether an economic boom will play out in the UK retail sector remains to be seen, but there are areas for potential recovery.

1.8 **Luxury is in vogue...**

Shopping from the comfort of home has been one of the positive takeaways from the pandemic for many, meaning comfort will also need to extend to in-store shopping experiences.

Capitalising on this trend is fashion interrupter and Not Just Another Store co-founder Joel Adebayo, with the launch of physical space Not Just Another Store New Inn. According to Joel, The New Inn Yard Shoreditch location is designed to be a place where 'community meets representation on all fashion, lifestyle and artistic levels, bringing a multi-sensory experience that delivers the much-missed rarity of personal connection to digital ease of the shopping realm.'

What this means is 25 international brands within four rooms – The Reception, The Living Room, The Library and The Terrace – in the new space, aiming to provide memorable experiences for consumers venturing outside for experiential shopping.

¹³Source: <https://www.cirkle.com/>

¹⁴Source: <https://www.encoded.co.uk/>

¹⁵Source: <https://pressreleases.responsesource.com/news/101291/the-return-of-the-roaring-twenties-prepare-to-capitalise-on/>

1.9 ...as are memorable experiences

Physical stores are now much more than just a place to buy, as consumers 'showroom'¹⁶; checking out sizing and materials, quality and suitability before buying at a later date or going on to order online. Enticing shoppers in-store is just part of the value of in-person consumerism, according to the statistics.

Over 72% of millennials and Gen Z are prepared to spend more on an experience than a product, according to Agile Retail's industry briefing *Fixing Retail Stores: 2021 and Beyond*.¹⁷ And this appetite for experience when spending money may be broad; iD's *Redefining Consumer Experiences Post-Lockdown*¹⁸ study found that 84% of UK consumers want to try new brand experiences post-lockdown, with seven in ten of its respondents saying that digital experiences do not compare to the real thing.

1.10 Sustainability and ethical motivations are on the rise

Watching the rolling back of centuries of pollution across the world during such a comparatively short period has more of us turning towards a more mindful kind of consumption – something that will continue to impact motivation:

'Retailers will need data and clear insight about how the pandemic has impacted consumer values,' believes Red Flag Alert's chief economist Dr Nichola Headlam.

'Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, shoppers were increasingly motivated by sustainability and ethical, responsible behaviours. The struggles and widespread negative effects of the past year are likely to strengthen these values further, with people more and more inclined to spend their money with retailers who treat employees fairly and respect the environment. Investing in Living Wage employment, employee ownership and share-type schemes, and supply chain sustainability will help retailers drive sales and build brand loyalty.'

1.11 Data will be required reading for both retailers and the PR industry serving them

'The future success of high street retail will very much depend on retailers embracing a data-led recovery,' continues Red Flag Alert's Dr Nichola Headlam.

'Retail supply chains are creaking under tens of millions of pounds of debt – bad debt in the sector increased by over 54% last year – which risks a domino effect of failure. Retailers, their suppliers or landlords going out of business literally sucks huge amounts of money out of retail supply chains, making it increasingly harder for other retail businesses to survive. Retailers can strengthen resilience and growth prospects by properly understanding the financial health of the companies they rely on. This will help safeguard their cashflow and protect margins against the ripple effect of companies going bust and bad debt.'

Number crunching and market research will also be the lifeblood of campaigns for the retail sector, according to Cirkle's head of trade communications Amy Searle:

'More than ever, growth and survival will be rooted in rich data and insight to understand shopper behaviours and what they want from different brands, retailers and establishments. In truly understanding their desires, PRs can uncover new and authentic ways to connect with them, via the right channels, at the right frequency and depth.'

¹⁶Source: <https://chainstoreage.com/technology/study-how-different-are-millennial-customers>

¹⁶Source: <https://www.agileretail.co.uk/retail-2021-industry-briefing>

¹⁷Source: <https://www.idagency.com/insight-section/redefining-consumer-experiences-post-lockdown/>

1.12

Local and people-led business could flourish

As lockdown increased need for human connection, the downsides of often impersonal digital shopping experiences have become clearer for consumers. As reported by Brightpearl in February of this year,¹⁸ larger operators are also moving away from the impersonal to more localised connections, with one in five retailers planning to move stores out of major city centres and into local high streets within the next 12 months, as of the time of the study.

For Cirkle's Kate Gibson, this is a good move, as local businesses will be a priority for many consumers wanting to reconnect with their community and shop for locally-sourced products:

'During a year where online retail has ruled, the increased digitisation of shopping has emphasised everything that tech can't do: communicating at a human level, creating communities and generating loyalty. As we start to emerge from lockdown, we must acknowledge the importance of local community, locally sourced products and lead with a people-first approach.

'We will be working collaboratively with journalists and influencers to develop authentic stories which create moments of understanding for our clients with their consumers and are genuinely helpful to those groups - be it a specific product, service, community initiative or a brilliant deal for example. Working with journalists and influencers to deliver outstanding coverage is fantastic but these stories also need to work hard to deliver behaviour change and a tangible business outcome, whether that's driving footfall into store, e-commerce sales or brand perception changes.

'Despite shrinking editorial teams, hyper-local media will continue to serve as important channels for retail brands in their local communities. It's important to recognise PR's role in working closely with retailers on the ground to create stories which are highly targeted and relevant to their local areas.'

¹⁸ Source: <https://www.theindustry.fashion/retailers-set-to-relocate-out-of-major-city-centres-as-consumers-plan-to-shop-more-locally/>

2. Pulsar & RS

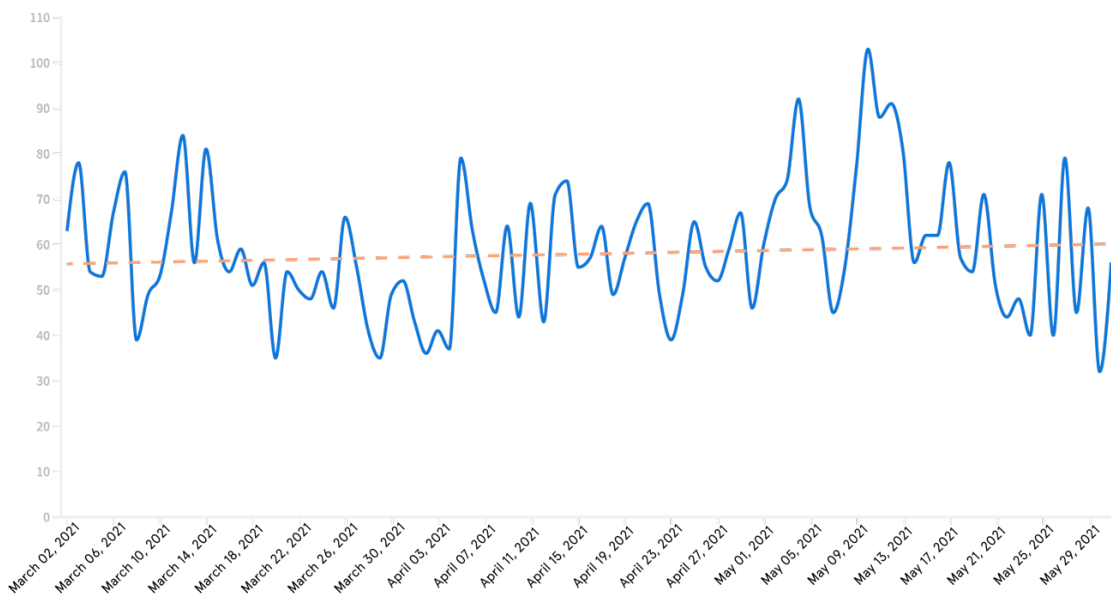
Using audience intelligence and social listening from Pulsar, as well as analysis of the journalist enquiries sent through ResponseSource, we can identify a number of retail trends that apply to the return of retail.

2.1 Second-hand goods

With many consumers replacing social activities with purchasing goods online or clearing out their unwanted items, the rise of second-hand selling was perhaps inevitable. As lockdown restrictions ease though, this trend looks set to increase – validating Etsy's recent purchase of depop.

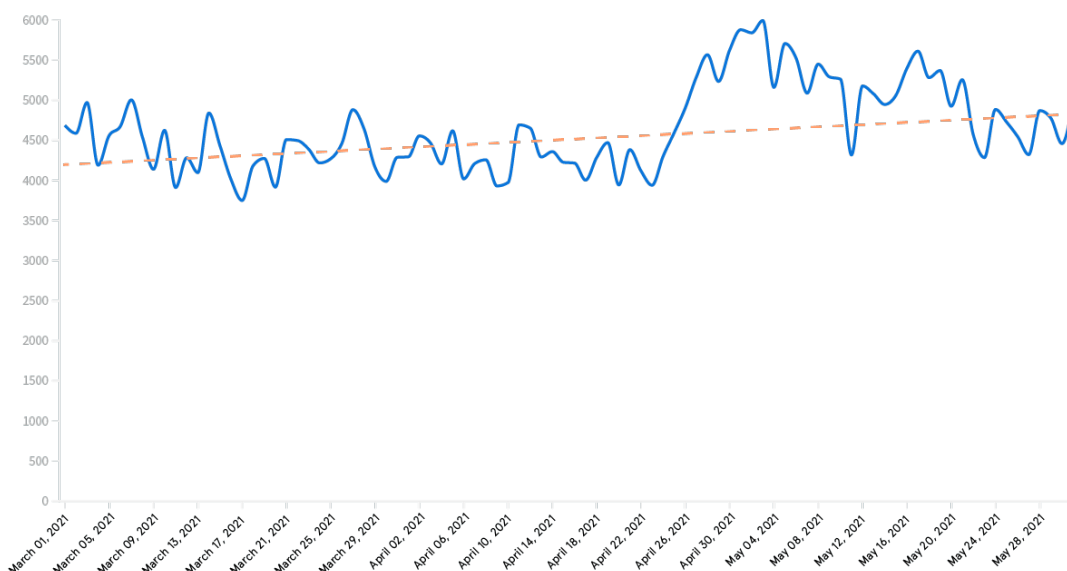
By measuring the combined shares of depop.com, gumtree.com and shpock.com links through Pulsar, we can see a steady increase over the last three months since lockdown eased.

Figure 1: Shares of links to depop.com, gumtree.com and shpock.com



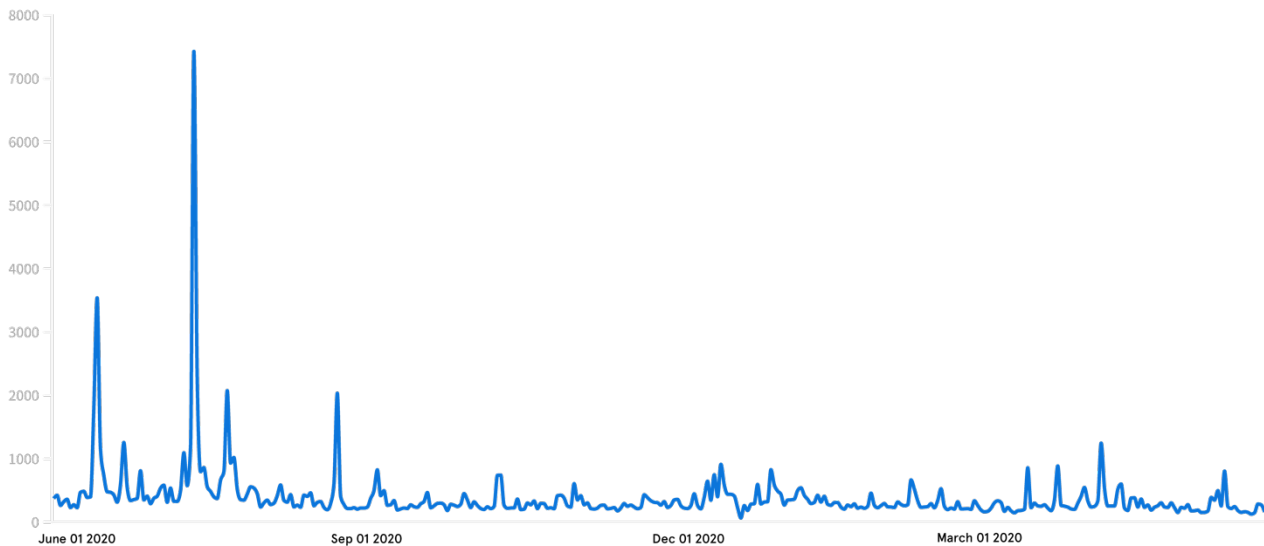
On a much larger scale, with thousands of shared links each day, eBay has an even stronger rise in shares as the most popular platform for second-hand selling.

Figure 2: Shares of links to ebay.com



2.2 Going Shopping

Figure 3: UK discussion of going shopping on Twitter



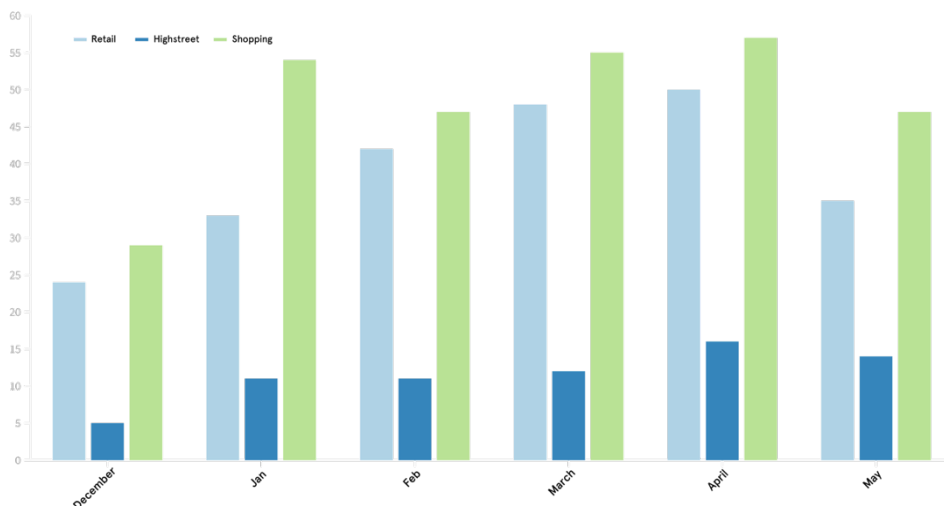
As the graph shows, when lockdown 1 eased in 2020, the conversation about “Going shopping” increased on Twitter, with a number of spikes as lockdown eased into the summer months. However, the easing of lockdowns 2 and 3 has not led to the same excitement or level of discussion online, which should cause concern. With confusion over when things can and can’t open, and public attention turning to travel restrictions, physical stores may struggle to see the same level of return as in that short window of 2020.

2.3 Media Enquiries

The number of retail-based enquiries sent through ResponseSource by journalists and broadcasters steadily increased from December through to April. This graph shows that more media stories were covering general retail, high streets and shopping as the lockdown easing roadmap was put in place and enacted.

The dip in May is potentially cause for concern as retail could still use the support that earned media brings, though a combination of two bank holidays and shops running more regularly by that point, could explain the minor reduction.

Figure 4: Journalist Enquiries sent through ResponseSource



3. Case study: Big Wave PR's Shop Safe, Shop Local campaign

Herts and North Herts District Council needed help with safely reopening the local high street back in November 2020 and Big Wave PR¹⁹ were ready to help with the Shop Safe, Shop Local campaign. But with lockdowns 1 through 3, the work wasn't without its challenges...

'Whatever plans we create, we have had to change constantly – this has been the most challenging campaign we have ever worked on.'

Here, the team at Big Wave PR explain how they have overcome the challenges they're facing.

East Herts and North Herts District Council, like many other councils across the country, were awarded significant funds by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Her Majesty's Government (HMG) to Re-open the High Streets Safely. The funds were awarded due to the ongoing pandemic with an aim to keep the public safe while re-opening shops, bars and restaurants.

We've been working with the two councils since November on an overarching campaign to encourage residents to shop safe and shop local through the pandemic.

The original brief was to supply communications and public information activity to ensure that reopening of local economies can be managed successfully and safely. In a nutshell, it required a hardworking PR, social media and advertising campaign to ensure all business owners re-opened safely, while all members of the public were reminded of the latest public health advice.

We're specialists in the public sector and have worked with a wide range of local councils, such as Chelmsford City Council and Essex County Council. East Herts and North Herts District Councils are just a stone's throw from our offices, so we knew we'd be able to provide specialist advice as well as hands-on support when required.

The pandemic has hit all business hard and we were keen to work on a large campaign that would really benefit our High Streets and support business, from small independents to larger chain stores.

The pitch process was competitive and in-depth. We had to put together detailed proposals to show how we would engage with each member of the public, from students through to the retired, who may have been shielding for many months. We outlined a campaign with a multi-channel approach, including bought media opportunities with a local outreach across newspapers, broadcast and online. We also needed to develop a creative identity for the campaign and, in partnership with our associate design agency Phelan Barker, were able to put together a collection of proposed visuals, which really helped bring the campaign to life.

Our MD Hilary Collins is our PR and campaign strategist, and she used her skills to breakdown community groups to create channels of communication that would directly fit each group. The team got together for collective inspiration to provide creative difference. Our creative director Carl Allen was keen to show a welcoming side to the High Street, albeit with retailers in masks, which became a common theme throughout our communications. The design team, headed by James Phelan, were amazing at creating a bespoke design solution, which joined the two councils together under a shared theme and clearly and very succinctly got over our Shop Safe, Shop Local message.

This has been the most challenging campaign we have ever worked on; whatever plans we create we have to change constantly. The pandemic, and the Government's reaction to keep COVID-19 in check, means we're adapting and refining our messaging and scheduling on a weekly or even daily basis. On our first day of the contract, the UK was placed into the second lockdown.

¹⁹ Source: <http://www.wearebigwavepr.co.uk/>

Again, we were ready to launch a New Year pledge campaign and again, we were placed in another lockdown, so we had to reflect and quickly adapt to ensure our messaging was in-step with Government guidance.

The campaign region covers nine towns, so it was vital we gained the support of each town council and BID (Business Improvement District). We undertook in-depth pre-campaign engagement to really understand and get to know each town's needs. We also worked alongside Hertfordshire County Council to understand what messaging was already out there on the High Street and to also reflect on its COVID-19 safety campaign public information designs. This engagement activity really helped shape the campaign, and ensured we developed marketing communications that looked 'in-keeping' and targeted the local issues.

When it comes to KPIs, there are several aspects of this campaign we're proud of. First-up, we're strong believers in 'a picture tells a thousand words'. At the beginning of the campaign we commissioned our photographer to take stunning pictures of retailers going about their business, all masked-up, but all showing the passion they have for their business. We wanted to create a standout message, fresh communications that would turn heads and make a difference. The British spirit is alive and well on our High Streets and we wanted to demonstrate that, which our pictures show. These images have become the focal point for our content across social, online and advertising channels.



We're also really impressed with the KPIs we've achieved for our New Year Pledge campaign. We had planned a big New Year launch to encourage all to buy local, but once we heard the country was going into lockdown, we transformed all communications into a 'buy local and buy online' campaign. Although we're encouraging residents to support their High Street, it is always safety first.

For the revised launch we employed a range of digital outlets to get the message across and to target those in the community who were more adept at online shopping. We arranged media interviews with Councillors on radio, placed online news stories, bought homepage 'takeovers' on key media outlets, issued template social content to all town councils and BIDs to share on their own social channels, and created online ads to push online traffic through to online shopping pages. The stats have proved very impressive.

What lessons from this will we take forward into future projects? We've always thought of ourselves as flexible and can change our plans to meet the every-changing needs of our clients. But this project has really taught us to be ultra-adaptable!

²⁰Source: <https://www.vuelio.com/uk/blog/anatomy-of-a-campaign-big-wave-pr-on-shop-safe-shop-local/>

4. Case study: How White Rose PR supports local business with local PR

PR director Louise Pinchin has always believed in the power of regional PR and marketing – being born and bred in Yorkshire, community is one of the reasons her company is called White Rose PR.²¹

Over the last year, White Rose PR has worked with several local businesses to help keep the wider business community thriving – ‘as a Yorkshire-based business, we want to support those local to us,’ says Louise. Here, she shares how White Rose PR did it and why local PR is so important.

Local PR is a great way to build brand awareness in the community, to reach new and existing customers and build your brand reputation among an audience that is waiting to be reached.

By creating and maintaining a positive relationship with your local press, print and online, you are setting yourself up for ongoing coverage opportunities and positive press stories about you in the future. Regional PR has many advantages, one of which is that it is often less expensive than larger national campaigns. It’s also easier to see a direct impact on sales or business leads from a piece of regional PR, especially if it is done in isolation of other marketing activity. You are also targeting readily accessible customers through local PR, something that is entirely different with national activity.

Don’t think of regional PR as the poor relation to any other type of coverage your brand, company or service receives. It’s not a throwaway, easy-to-get activity and it shouldn’t be bottom of the priority list. Start thinking of it as a powerful tool in your marketing armoury when used in a timely and appropriate way.

As I always say to my clients, *why wouldn’t* you want the coverage? Why give your competitors column inches that you could be taking up?

We work with Rubicon Technical, a technical services provider to the medicines, medical devices, food supplements and cosmetics industries. In late 2020, they opened their first European office in Amsterdam, just before Brexit. Why was this a good story? Because it was a positive story of a local entrepreneur who built up her business here in Yorkshire to a 15-strong team and expanded into Europe during one of the most challenging years this country has ever faced and at a pivotal time in our country’s political and economic history.

The result was extensive regional media coverage including the Yorkshire Post, Yorkshire Business Daily²² and Business Live²³ as well as local coverage in Holland. The outcome was an increase in enquiries and business as well as increased social media engagement.

So, give it a try, because regional PR works.

²¹Source: <https://whiterosepr.co.uk/>

²²Source: <https://www.business-live.co.uk/professional-services/consultancies/consumer-healthcare-specialist-goes-dutch-19329591>

²³Source: <https://www.business-live.co.uk/professional-services/consultancies/consumer-healthcare-specialist-goes-dutch-19329591>

5. 10 top tips for retail communicators as we come out of lockdown

1. Connect with audiences in new and innovative ways, whether in-person or online

'Be adaptable, embrace change and find new ways to get closer to your shoppers – physically and virtually. Those that are able to connect with shoppers authentically, seamlessly and able to differentiate themselves from their competitors will be the ones to succeed.

'As an example, 57% of UK convenience stores began a home delivery service following increased demand from their shoppers during the first national lockdown, which resulted in the convenience channel averaging over 600k deliveries a week. Capitalising on the nation's desire to shop locally, community-based stores also broadened their offering to tap into trends for baking, gardening and recreating the pub experience at-home.

'Hand-in-hand with this, we're also seeing a convergence of local businesses and a continued rise of dark stores and ghost kitchens, with local complementary outlets coming together as part of the total solution.'

Circle's²⁴ Head of Trade Communications Amy Searle

2. Don't underestimate the in-person/experiential experience

'New technologies are drastically changing the way that retailers communicate with their audiences, but experiential technology is no longer a 'nice-to-have' for embattled retailers. Brands must use new tools to revolutionise their shops, which could help them create and maintain a competitive edge. Above all, they must harness the power of immersive and experiential shopping experiences to help revive their stores.'

Epson Europe B.V.²⁵ Vice President CISMEA and Professional Displays Neil Colquhoun

3. Capitalise on post-lockdown enthusiasm to get back outside

'I think the older age groups are going to be more cautious about going to events, younger age groups will be desperate to go out and do things again.

'All we can go on is that there seems to be this pent-up demand for people having been locked down and now wanting to go out and do things again. I think we saw it to some extent last summer, there was certainly demand for the few events that took place on a small-scale last year.

'I think all the signs are there that people want to get back out into the world.'

Events Industry Forum²⁶ secretary Jim Winship, Redefining Consumer Experiences Post-Lockdown²⁷

4. Prepare for a potential downturn in sales in autumn/winter

'Retailers need to be very wary of the lean autumn and winter months and potentially suppressed spending around the traditional Black Friday and Christmas peaks. The financial hangover from a summer spending spree and growing unemployment post-furlough could leave shoppers with less disposable income and little inclination to splash out during the festive season.'

Red Flag Alert²⁸ chief economist Dr Nicola Headlam

²⁴ Source: <https://www.circle.com/>

²⁵ Source: <https://www.epson.co.uk/>

²⁶ Source: <https://www.eventsindustryforum.co.uk/>

²⁷ Source: <https://www.idagency.com/insight-section/redefining-consumer-experiences-post-lockdown/>

²⁸ Source: <https://www.redflagalert.com/>

5. Drive societal change

'It's coming up to six years since the carrier bag charge came into force in the UK. This was a significant move from the retail industry in fighting the plastic entering our waste system. Fast-forward to today and the demands on retailers are higher than ever. We're seeing the need to revolutionise the packaging products are supplied in, we're seeing scrutiny of transparency in supply chains, and the demand for businesses, including retailers, to stand for something bigger than themselves. More than ever, retail businesses are seen as more than where we pick up our groceries, but as brands with power to drive societal change.'

Cirke²⁹ PR's Senior Account Director, Corporate Reputation Jessica Kirby

6. Use data to understand the new 'empowered and educated' consumer

'Retailers must keep up with the buying patterns of increasingly empowered and educated consumers. As the demand for personalised, real-time engagement grows, integration between ecommerce, inventory, pricing, order management, service, and marketing systems is necessary for providing a seamless customer experience.'

Solace³⁰ vice president, Europe Vincent Rontani

7. Be authentic

'Authentic communication will always shine through. People don't want cynical, opportunistic companies trying to sell them things they don't need, particularly during a global crisis. Profiteering from a pandemic isn't a good look.'

'The societal shift that has occurred over the past twelve months has seen communities come together to support each other. What resonates now is raw, honest communication to create a more favourable perception of trustworthy, helpful businesses.'

Honest Communications³¹ founder Holly Daulby

8. Integrate the digital into the physical to help health and safety concerns

'Ordering digitally has become a way of life, and with the rise of to-go orders during the COVID-19 pandemic there has been accelerated adoption of mobile ordering. Travelers, for example, are increasingly taking advantage of this technology to have more control over their meal orders, which is helping them to reduce the number of touchpoints and maintain safe social distancing.'

Servy³² chief experience officer Jeff Livney

9. Online retailers: demonstrate personality and empathy

'It's never been more important to get customer service right – both in a shop and online. Internet shopping is very competitive and a one-dimensional experience compared to visiting a shop.'

'The business that can add personality, empathy and positive customer interaction to online customer service will be a winner.'

British Independent Retailers Association³³ editor & communications manager Emily Bridgewater

²⁹Source: <https://www.cirke.com/>

³⁰Source: <https://solace.com/>

³¹Source: <http://www.honestcommunications.co.uk/>

³²Source: <https://servy.us/>

³³Source: <https://bira.co.uk/>

10. Want to support the high street yourself? Consider offering your services pro-bono to local businesses

'58% of Brits³⁴ are making more of an effort to support small businesses due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with nearly 60% agreeing that their community depends on local businesses. Individuals shifting their investment of time and money into local businesses seems to be a trend that is (rightly so) here to stay.

'Whether it is providing PR training, advising on internal messaging or giving a quick 'Social Media 101' to help a business get their social media off the ground, every little bit counts. It's a small yet incredibly valuable way of providing business owners with the insights, tools and resources necessary to adapt and survive during these unprecedented times.

'Despite these challenging times, there is so much that can be done to ensure the continued success of our local businesses. Let's help where we can.'

Gallium Ventures³⁵ managing director and founder Heather Delaney

³⁴ Source: <https://newsroom.bt.com/more-than-31m-brits-pledge-to-support-small-businesses-this-christmas/>

³⁵ Source: <https://galliumventures.com/>

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