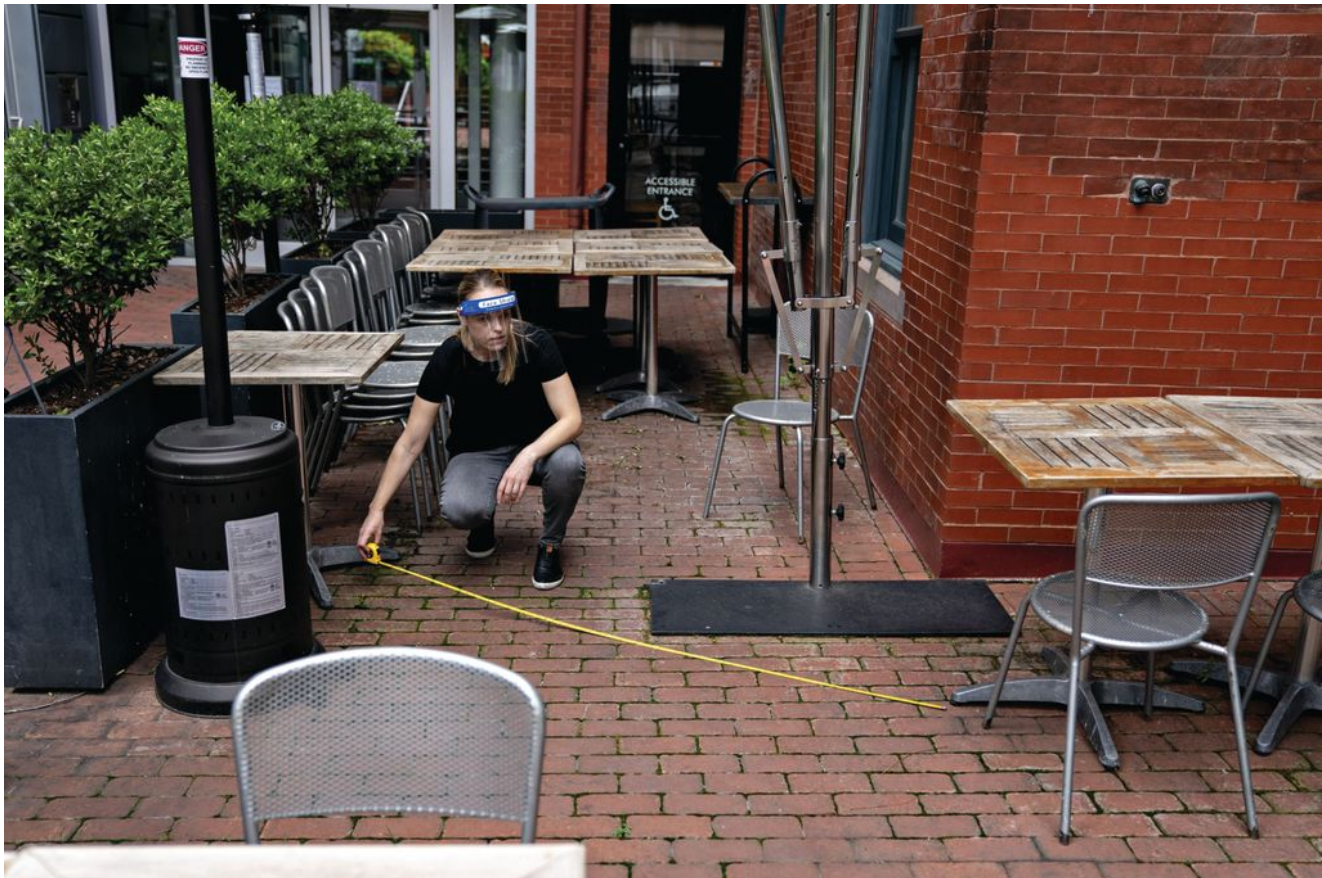


How brands should communicate safety while reopening businesses during COVID-19

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A worker uses measuring tape to check the distance between outdoor tables and chairs at a restaurant in Washington D.C.

Credit: Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg

After largely keeping customers away due to COVID-19, restaurants, retailers, resorts and other businesses are starting to reopen, albeit with changes that may take some getting used to. Staffers and visitors may be subject to temperature checks. Face masks and gloves are becoming as common as uniforms. And plexiglass shields at counters are the new normal. More recently, protests and looting following the killing of George Floyd have added a new layer of concern. Below, some tips for brands to consider as they welcome customers back.

Read the room

Speak in ways that aren't tone-deaf. What worked before may not feel appropriate in the current climate. "Address the idea that customers and employees are still in this state of fear and anxiety," says Denise Lee Yohn, a brand leadership consultant. And ensure employees are on board with the message. "The last thing you want is to have a message out there on media that isn't delivered on," she says.

It's also okay to be honest. Lush was in the process of reopening its beauty shops across North America with new safety protocols and then decided to keep several stores closed following protests and looting. Lush was simple and direct in explaining the situation to customers on Facebook, saying, "We do not know when we will reopen, but we'll let you know right here when we do."

Don't overpromise

"Get really specific," says Hannah Taylor, a partner in the advertising group at Frankfurt Kurnit Klein & Selz, about new cleaning techniques and other practices brands are taking to make customers feel safe. Businesses should be careful to call out what they are doing rather than make major proclamations. Don't suggest unqualified safety because it's too hard to prove, she says. Spell out steps such as spacing out tables for social distancing and wiping surfaces more frequently. "You can tell the story without overpromising," says Taylor. Social media posts can be less heavy. "Leave your website or even press releases to explain more of the safety protocols," advises Yohn.

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Engage early

Main Event, whose entertainment centers feature high-touch activities including bowling, laser tag, and arcade games, asked mothers what types of measures they wanted to see before returning. "The most scrutinizing, most concerned and conservative mom, if she felt good, then we knew we were far and away overdelivering," says Chief Brand Officer Sarah Beddoe. A video message from its CEO outlines new processes including a "bowling valet" to help keep balls clean.

Beware of false advertising laws

Businesses struggling during the pandemic may be tempted to run sales, but should not entice people "in a way that they can't substantiate," says Taylor. When offering a percent-off deal, ensure the product has actually been offered at a regular original price.

Consider a partnership

United Airlines teamed up with Clorox to communicate new cleaning protocols. Hilton is rolling out CleanStay, a partnership with RB, maker of Lysol and Dettol, and the Infection Prevention and Control team at Mayo Clinic. Amy Martin-Ziegenfuss, VP-global brand marketing at Hilton, says the program will deliver on the “new standard of cleanliness that will help guests feel comfortable traveling again.” Hilton will promote CleanStay online, to members and through signage at properties, seals on guest room doors and mirror clings.

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