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# Reopening America: Strategies for Safer Retail Stores

## Overview

Main streets and downtowns across the United States rely on a diversity of shops, restaurants, and essential services to serve residents and create the vibrant sense of community that shape many of our lives.

These retailers are arguably the bedrock of our consumer-driven economy. The industry represents approximately \$2.6 trillion of the annual gross domestic product, employs approximately 29 million people and supports more than 42 million other jobs in the US.<sup>1</sup>

Reopening US retailers following the pandemic is critical to the US economy and the sector's survival. With the exception of online sales, the National Retail Federation (NRF) observed a month-over-month decline in sales during April<sup>2</sup> for every category of retail, including grocery stores and others that had seen increases in March as consumers stocked up to comply with stay-at-home orders. Meanwhile, **a slew of major US retailers** are filing for bankruptcy, and **a record number of stores are anticipated to close in 2020**.

During the pandemic, battered retailers will need to embrace protocols and strategies to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission while rebuilding the confidence of consumers and employees who will no doubt have anxieties about returning to brick-and-mortar locations. To do so, businesses will need to weigh a myriad of complex and often contradictory federal, state, and local regulations in determining best practices for operating. This document and related tools aim to help retailers navigate these challenges as they reopen stores.

## Background

During the pandemic, essential retailers maintained operations while implementing both established and ad-hoc safety protocols for social distancing, screening, hygiene, and sanitation. Some stores and restaurants added services such as drive-up and curbside pickup as well as deliveries. Meanwhile, many small and medium non-chain, non-essential retail stores that closed during the pandemic were forced to lay off employees. Reopening is critical to the survival of many of these businesses.

With restrictions lifting, retail owners must address how their facilities, particularly public areas such as sales floors, checkout areas, customer service, fitting rooms, and restrooms, will be modified to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

According to the NRF, two-thirds of consumers have said that technology, such as augmented and virtual reality, smart dressing rooms, and in-store navigation apps, have improved their in-store experiences.<sup>3</sup> At the point of sale, technologies such as self-checkout and mobile payment have made checking out an easier and more satisfying experience. Implementing these technologies may raise costs, but they offer alternative ways to maintain some of the desirable attributes of a brick-and-mortar store.

### **Step-by-step Risk Management Plan for Buildings**

When reopening retail stores, businesses can utilize a seven-step **Risk Management Plan for Buildings** to assess hazards and apply architectural and engineering strategies (controls) to reduce risk. The primary objective is protecting the health and safety of employees and customers, from distribution centers to stores, while creating a comfortable customer experience. Goals may include:

- Adopting adequate mitigation strategies to protect employees and customers from transmitting and acquiring the virus while working and shopping in the store.
- Communicating mitigation strategies and expectations of both employees and customers to achieve compliance and promote a sense of security among all occupants.
- Implementing protocols that address what to do if an employee or customer is sick or not following guidelines.
- Developing alternatives for product testing, such as fitting clothing or footwear, that lead to purchases.
- Developing protocols for deliveries, purchase pickups, product returns, and inventory storage and retrieval.

## Hazards and strategies in retail stores

- Supporting the well-being of staff through training, communications, and accommodating sufficient time and protocol for breaks, meals, and cleaning.

### **Mitigations for a safer reopening should address the following hazards:**

- Risk of transmission through close personal contact among employees, customers, vendors, and the public while in the store or through delivery.
- Risk of virus transmission through surface contact at point of sale (POS) and on packages, products customers do not buy, or returned or exchanged items; all surfaces should be considered, including shopping carts, fitting rooms, and controls (doors, switches, etc.).
- Aerosolized transmission of virus droplets possibly transmitted through HVAC systems.
- Fecal/oral transmission via shared restrooms.

For more detailed information on public health hazards and considerations in retail spaces and other buildings, see [AIA's COVID-19 emerging research and public health data](#).

### **Strategies for retail stores**

- In a sequence of multiple checkout stands, consider temporarily closing every other cash register to create more distance.
- Carefully install translucent shields (e.g. “sneeze guards”) between employee and customer at checkout.
- Move electronic payment terminals/credit card readers so there is distance between employees and customers. Encourage contactless payment options.<sup>4</sup>
- Encourage online purchasing with pickup at a designated location or delivery to the customer’s address.<sup>5</sup>
- Use visual cues, such as signs, tape marks, and decals, placed six feet apart to indicate where to stand when physical barriers are not possible.<sup>6</sup>
- Develop a merchandizing strategy that enables physical distancing,<sup>7</sup> such as shifting primary stocking activities to off-peak or after-work hours, when possible, to reduce contact with customers<sup>8</sup> or creating methods to receive returns and exchanges that minimize contact between customers and employees.<sup>9</sup>
- Identify and address potential language, cultural, and disability barriers associated with communicating COVID-19 virus information to employees and customers.<sup>10</sup>
- Place touchless hand sanitizer stations in multiple locations to encourage hand hygiene, and place multilingual posters that encourage hand hygiene where they are likely to be seen by employees and customers.
- Provide disposable disinfecting wipes so that employees can wipe down commonly used surfaces (e.g., door handles, keyboards, remote controls, desks, other work tools and equipment) before each use.

- Ensure operating hours allow for downtime between shifts for thorough and routine cleaning<sup>11</sup> of all frequently touched surfaces in the workplace, such as workstations, keyboards, telephones, handrails, and door handles.
- Discourage employees from using colleagues' phones, desks, workstations, radios, handhelds, wearables, and other work tools and equipment.<sup>12</sup> See illustration for employee break room strategies.
- Prohibit employees from eating or drinking anywhere inside the workplace other than the designated break rooms to ensure masks are being worn at work consistently and correctly.<sup>13</sup>
- Dedicate shopping hours for vulnerable populations, preferably at a time that follows a complete cleaning.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the above strategies, a more extensive list of controls for re-occupying retail stores and other buildings is available in [AIA's Re-occupancy Assessment Tool](#).

## Corner market

The numbered strategies below reference the [AIA Re-occupancy Assessment Tool](#) framework.



General HVAC notes:

**3.6.2** Ensure ventilation systems operate properly and provide acceptable indoor air quality for the current occupancy level

**3.6.3** Monitor relative humidity

**3.6.4** and **3.6.15** Increase ventilation rates and air changes; consider temporary bypass of energy recovery systems

**3.6.10** Clean HVAC intakes daily

**3.10.3** Permanent outdoor canopy for partially protected exterior queuing

**3.3.5** Glazed storefront maximized to increase daylight

**3.9.4** Utilize no-touch trash cans

**3.10.1** Signage identifying reserved parking space for curbside pick-up

**3.10.2** Restriped parking space to accommodate exterior queuing

**3.6.2** Utilize touch-free time cards

**3.4.1** Posted signage describing risk mitigation strategies and policies

**4.4.3** Deliveries accepted only at loading doors

**3.7.2** Replace light switches with motion sensor controls or phone-based app controls

**3.3.1** Separate entry and exit doors provided for safety & efficiency. Consider adding touchless entry capability

**3.9.7** Modular display system includes laminate tops and removable fronts for use as easily reconfigurable greeting and check-out stations

**4.4.1** Modular display equipment on locking casters provides flexibility in configuration and ease in restocking with minimal employee presence in market area.

**3.2.1** Modular display system includes easily reconfigurable shelves affixed to a grid of threaded grommets in plywood wall panels



**3.4.5** Map the floor surface to delineate circulation and/or furniture location

**3.2.2** Amount of display equipment reduced by approximately 20% to increase spacing

**4.3.2** Shopping basket sanitizing area

**3.5.3** and **3.4.2** Touchless handwashing station with posted hygiene, cleaning and sanitizing signage

**4.4.3** Pre-ordered products are held for pick-up on storeroom shelving

**4.4.1** Modular display equipment on locking casters are pre-stocked in the storeroom then rolled out to quickly replace modules with low stock

## Considerations when selecting mitigation strategies

Retailers will need to be thoughtful in exploring mitigation strategies for COVID-19, especially when determining the extent to which architectural and engineering strategies are possible. When seeking to change behavior, physical alterations are more effective than administrative ones. In leased spaces, retailers will need to determine their right to make alterations to the premises. This includes common areas that are beyond the control of the tenant and where a landlord's efforts must be pursued. Additionally, businesses will need to ascertain the types of alterations that will require a landlord's approval versus the improvements the retailer has a right to make on their own with approval of the authority having jurisdiction. Landlords may also have their own policies, security protocol, and other factors to consider.

Businesses should also consider how strategies will affect other store operations, such as life safety (egress), security, anti-pilfering measures, and accessibility for those with physical limitations. Further, certain mitigation strategies may require employee and customer compliance, which could create conflicts and erode the customer experience. Enforcement protocols and employee training will be needed to ensure these situations are managed appropriately.

Additionally, while the CDC recently stated that the risk of infection from surface contact is lower than previously thought, implementing touch-free devices, such as automatic entry/exit doors, touch-free restroom fixtures, and touchless self-checkout systems, will provide customers with a level of comfort while also mitigating the risk of other seasonal illness like the cold and flu. Staff should routinely clean counters, phones, POS machines, surfaces, etc. in accordance with CDC guidelines. Doing so will promote a safer retail environment, gain customer confidence, and increase customer comfort levels.

Duration of exposure and contamination of surfaces are just two examples of recommendations that have been revised as more is learned about the virus and its transmission. The CDC, OSHA and others will continue to revise recommendations, and employers will need to remain vigilant. Layered with codified regulations and potential exposure to liabilities from risk of infection, these guidelines should be carefully considered and implemented in a way that maximizes protection and minimizes the potential of compliance fatigue.

Over time, retail workers and patrons may find themselves feeling restricted, craving normalcy, and perhaps questioning a perceived overreach of authorities. Therefore, retailers should clearly communicate to employees and customers the protocols adopted to mitigate risk of COVID-19 and explain why they are in place. These protocols may add extra steps and increase the time it takes to complete tasks, and employers should empathize with staff and make accommodations.

During all phases of reopening, it will be critical for employers to create a safe and healthy environment for consumers that also promotes a calming customer experience. Recent trends toward online ordering with in-store pickup and direct home delivery from stores have accelerated. Options that allow consumers to make decisions based on their personal preferences, comfort levels, and circumstances will be critical. Traditional brick-and-mortar retailers will succeed

by diversifying their business models, modifying their point of sale operations, and reallocating capital to initiatives that prepare for an altered retail landscape. Providing options for consumers and communities is a win-win and creates more resilient retail businesses while also maintaining a community's sense of identity and connection to its residents.

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