



Everyone's writing their "end of the pandemic" pieces. I've shared some thoughts about post-pandemic marketing concerns and opportunities, mostly around what I consider the biggest question: how many of the changes in consumer behavior will become permanent, and how marketers will rise to the challenges – or not. I'm going to focus on one element today: the future of experiential retailing.

But first...

Warren G. Harding is generally remembered for the corruption of his administration (he himself was probably too lazy to be corrupt, and too happy-go-lucky to notice the corruption around him). He died during his only term as president, some say poisoned by his wife, who was tired of his affairs, drinking and poker nights.

But Harding is also remembered for coining the word we all use now: normalcy. Correctly reading the public mood of fatigue after the Great War (they didn't call it World War One yet) and the changes of the Progressive Era in the decades before the war, he promised a return to normality. But he used the word "normalcy," and it's been with us ever since. Whichever word we use, it's what we all want to get back to.

Harding also had an Airedale terrier (if you know me, you know I love Airedales). Laddy Boy was the most famous dog in America. He even held press conferences and photo ops. He was certainly more interesting than President Harding. The thing is, I once met a man who, as a boy in Marion, Ohio, knew Harding AND Laddy Boy. I was more impressed with that encounter than with almost any other meeting I've had with famous or notable people. I still bore people with that story, almost fifty years later.

That's the power of individual experience.

Before the pandemic, retail was already in a precarious position. Too much real

estate, old fashioned formats, merchants slow to embrace multi-channel commerce. On trips to the mall, I was struck by how many storefronts weren't traditional retailers, but venues to experience products, play games and interact in communities of interest.

Savvy retailers understood that people can buy stuff from anywhere, with greater convenience and possibly better prices. To remain relevant, stores had to become destinations offering experiences difficult to deliver digitally – hands-on learning, live sampling, demonstrations and make-overs, live multi-player games, “third-place” locations to work, snack, shop or bank.

Just as this evolution was gaining traction, COVID forced stores to close, and one of the best ways to differentiate in-person from online shopping was lost for over a year. Now that we can shop safely again, retailers must get back to developing unique experiences if they are to thrive. Most folks are eager to get back to their old lives. Which retailers will innovate and create experiences that really drive people into brick-and-mortar venues? [Your thoughts?](#)

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