

# The Effect of COVID-19 on the Websites of Major Retailers

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# Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the impact COVID-19 has had on the website content and design for major consumer corporations. COVID-19 has changed the world in the last few months and businesses had to react quickly to adjust to a primarily online and delivery-based model.

While many businesses, including the three analyzed in this paper, had online stores and delivery options, their main focus has always been in-person shopping experiences. With the global pandemic coming into play, these stores had to shift their business to an online format in order to stay in business.

This paper will analyze the websites of Target, T.J.Maxx, and Walmart and the changes they have made based on the COVID-19 pandemic. When the pandemic originally started affecting consumers, changes to the websites of these three retailers likely changed often; however, now that the initial panic has subsided, the content is steadier and more reliable.

## The Effects of COVID-19 on Consumer Spending

Before diving into the depths of the analysis between the retailers, it is critical to mention the effect the pandemic has had on the purchasing patterns of individuals. With the high rates of unemployment and the uncertainty of the length or severity of the pandemic, many people stopped leisure spending; however, “spending increased dramatically in an attempt to stockpile needed home goods and also in anticipation of the inability to patronize retailers” (Baker, Farrokhnia, Meyer, Pagel, & Yannelis, 2020).

Spending was focused more on necessities than leisure goods. Everything from socks, hand sanitizer, and toilet paper, to cleaning supplies, food, and even video game consoles were sold out for weeks on end. Some still aren't readily available. Bicycles, swimming pools, and exercise equipment are also very high in demand. People across the United States use panic buying products as a coping response which “is then an act of preservation of self and the family when food and daily supplies are fully stocked even for a brief period of time” (Sim, Chua, Vieta, & Fernandez, 2020).

As retailers maneuvered through the pandemic, their customer's new priorities, and the extreme shortage of certain goods, the content, and design of their websites changed, sometimes daily. With most people and businesses slowly finding consistency, the content has been steady over the past few weeks; however, with a fluid situation such as a pandemic, it is likely to change again.

## Breaking Down the Sites

Each of the three retailers, Target, T.J.Maxx, and Walmart, took a slightly different approach to the content and resources added to their website. The location of the information is also quite interesting. Below is a breakdown of each of the websites, the content they offer, the ease of navigation, and the location of the content.

### Target

Target has content about COVID-19 three different times on their home page. The very first thing on the home page of the site is a large gray box that announces to all potential customers that masks are required in all stores. Typically gray is not used for health and safety announcements, but in the case of Target, where their brand color is bright red, it is very logical.

The second instance of COVID-19 on the site is about halfway through scrolling down the home page. On this page, there are two buttons that give "contactless shopping options." Throughout the pandemic, many people have utilized these options at different retailers to minimize being in public.

Finally, the third instance is almost all the way on the bottom under a heading that states "Our Corporate Commitments." The first button under this heading is labeled "health and operational changes in our stores." This button leads to a full web page of COVID-19 information with regards to Target including an FAQ section, blog posts, and what consumers can expect when entering one of their stores.

### T.J.Maxx

T.J.Maxx also mentions the coronavirus pandemic on its home page three times. The first is a small button at the top that says "A Message on COVID-19." This is simply a message from the CEO on the companies reaction to COVID-19.

On that same menu bar is a button that is labeled “Updates on our Stores.” While this does not initially stand out as regarding the pandemic, it does lead to a page that details new health and safety protocols as well as a link that lists the stores that are open and closed at this time.

The biggest item on the home page is a large area that says “our online home page is ready to shop.” This statement indicates that online shopping is not the standard for their customers or them. The box also includes details about potential delays in shipping.

## Walmart

Walmart is the outlier of the group. There is almost no information whatsoever on their home page about the pandemic. In fact, their home page looks completely normal. The only mention of COVID-19 is at the very bottom of the home page where there are buttons. One of the buttons is labeled “routine-ready safety picks” and the other is “no contact services.”

It is quite interesting that Walmart has almost no mention of the pandemic on their home page and will be discussed further in the analysis.

## Analysis

Each of the websites of the major retailers listed above was slightly different in their approach to handling the COVID-19 pandemic. While Target and T.J.Maxx each had three mentions of the pandemic in fairly prominent places on their website, Walmart barely mentions it at all.

One reason for the lack of information on Walmart’s site is likely that before the pandemic they already had a strong online-ordering presence. They are one of Amazon’s largest competitors for the online market and have very fast and reliable shipping across the nation and the world.

A second reason could be that many of their stores were still quite busy during the pandemic. Whereas a store like T.J.Maxx mostly focuses on clothes, home goods, and beauty products, Walmart consistently carries most essential products for any home. They are also very accessible in nearly every area.

T.J.Maxx, on the other hand, is very focused on the in-store experience and needed to make a major shift when the pandemic hit. Target’s reaction falls in the middle of this situation.

They did have good delivery and pick up options in place prior to the pandemic; however, most of their consumers still preferred in-store shopping. The transition during the pandemic was likely not as difficult for Target because they do offer groceries, toiletries, and electronics in addition to what T.J.Maxx offers.

Historically, Target is also more consumer-centric. They, at least on the surface, tend to be more vocal on issues and take safety concerns more seriously. Having a lot of information on their website is one way to keep loyal customers satisfied.

## Conclusion

Each of the three retailers, T.J.Maxx, Target, and Walmart, made changes to their websites as a result of COVID-19. While they each had slightly different content and volume of information, the information presented on their home pages reflects each company's needs.

For T.J.Maxx who does not typically sell what would be considered essential items and relied mostly on in-store consumers before the pandemic, they needed to have more information in high-traffic areas of their site. On the other hand, Walmart, a company with a very well-established delivery and in-store pickup option that provides essential items and services to consumers was not as concerned about the volume or location of their safety protocols.

COVID-19 has had an impact on each of these retailers and the way they now run their businesses. Their websites are just one small piece of their overall reaction and changes in business practices; however, it does give a good look into the overall response and how the pandemic may be affecting each business.

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