

ESSENTIAL RETAILERS | MASS MERCHANTS

# Major Undertaking

## Superstores use scale to support pandemic-stressed consumers, workers and communities

By Matt Alderton

**C** OVID-19 REMINDS CRISIS MANAGEMENT expert Edward Segal of the 1980 Broadway musical *42nd Street*, which tells the backstage story of an ill-fated musical whose lead actress breaks her ankle in the middle of the show's premiere. The doomed production is saved at the 11th hour when chorus girl Peggy Sawyer agrees to fill in. With just 36 hours to learn 25 pages, six songs and 10 dance numbers, she pulls off the performance of a lifetime.

Like Peggy, mass merchants such as Walmart, Target and Amazon have become the pandemic's unlikely breakout stars.

"Mass merchants have shown that they know their lines, know all the dance steps and that the show must go on," said Segal, author of *Crisis Ahead: 101 Ways to Prepare for and Bounce Back from Disasters, Scandals and Other Emergencies*.

But mass merchants aren't dancing. In a very real sense, they're helping to save lives.

"I consider mass merchant retailers and their employees to be the new first responders in this national public health emergency. In their own way, they are as important to the United States in helping us fight and survive COVID-19 as those who work in emergency rooms, hospitals and laboratories," Segal continued. "Like other first responders, mass merchant retailers have run toward this danger, not away from it."

It's an interesting turnabout for retail behemoths, whose size and power mean they're often maligned in public discourse: Suddenly, Goliath is as heroic as David.

"No one could have guessed we'd be in this situation only a few months ago. Yet these companies quickly adapted to the new reality, faced the challenge head-on and showed that you can, in fact, turn a supertanker on a dime," said Marc DeCoursey, senior vice president of the



Social distancing reminder at a Walmart store

WALMART

U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, which has been tracking the corporate response to COVID-19. "These large-scale companies are taking a close look at how their employees and communities are being impacted by this unprecedented time, and they're actively trying to alleviate the ensuing hardship."

Their responses have been rapid and comprehensive.

Walmart, for example, has limited the number of customers in its stores to promote social distancing, instituted

one-way movement through its aisles and has allowed seniors, first responders, customers with disabilities and anyone designated high-risk by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to receive contact-free pickup of online orders daily from 7 a.m. to 8 a.m. It also plans to hire more than 150,000 new associates; has given cash bonuses to hourly associates; expanded its paid leave policies; closed its stores overnight for cleaning and restocking; given employees instant access to earned wages; implemented a

new shopping cart sanitizing solution; offered virus pay to employees who contract COVID-19; installed sneeze guards and social distance markers; conducted routine temperature checks on employees; and furnished gloves and masks to associates. And in March, it committed \$25 million to coronavirus response and relief.

"America needs Walmart right now — and we have been at our absolute best,"

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Walmart U.S. President and CEO John Furner wrote in a March memo to associates.

Target has taken similar measures: It has reserved special shopping times for at-risk guests; limited the number of guests in stores; increased cleaning of carts, baskets and checkout lanes; and installed sneeze guards and social distance markers. It also is fast-tracking essential products through its supply chain and closing all stores by 9 p.m. to allow for restocking and deep cleaning.

For hourly store and distribution center employees, Target has temporarily raised wages by \$2 per hour; given bonuses to 20,000 hourly store leaders; provided disposable face masks and gloves; designated special employee-only shopping times; expanded their backup child care and elder care; instituted quarantine and confirmed illness pay; and extended 30 days of paid leave to associates who are elderly, pregnant or have underlying medical conditions. It also has donated anti-viral and N95 respirator masks to first responders and health care professionals at more than 50 organizations and has committed \$10 million to COVID-19 relief efforts for their employees as well national and international efforts.

"Families across the country are counting on Target in so many ways during this pandemic, and our team has been nothing short of remarkable," Target chairman and CEO Brian Cornell said in a statement. "The commitments we're making ... provide additional resources for our most valuable asset — our team — and ... support the critical work of our partners in communities impacted by the coronavirus."

For its part, Amazon has made more than 150 updates or changes to workplace processes to protect employees; hired 175,000 new workers; increased hourly wages by \$2; committed to pay double-time for each hour of overtime worked by hourly employees; established a \$25 million relief fund for delivery drivers and seasonal associates; created a \$5 million grant fund to support small businesses; and donated \$20 million to support COVID-19 research.

"We are facing a crisis unlike any other, and we know the path to recovery will rest on how quickly our communities can bounce back," DeCoursey said. "By hiring more people, raising their employees' pay and making tremendous contributions to community relief efforts, mass merchants are filling a critical gap — making sure that their employees and communities stay afloat in this turbulent time and in the aftermath."



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CHRIS DELMAS/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



Target store in Cambridge, Mass.

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— MARC DeCOURSEY,  
U.S. Chamber of Commerce  
Foundation



Walmart in Jacksonville, Fla.

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