

# OPINION

## Retail leadership lessons for our stop/go times

Against the sombre background of a second lockdown, how are retail chiefs motivating colleagues? **Fran Minogue** takes a look at the shining examples

**T**here was a horrible novelty to the first lockdown. We'd never been there before and the first priority was colleague safety and then to focus on keeping operations going.

And the weather was good; we had a lovely late spring and early summer, so at least that one hour of exercise a day could be spent in the park or the garden.

It all feels so different this time around. The second lockdown has been met with weariness, resignation, cynicism and even anger, as many feel the tiered approach was working and the havoc wreaked on the economy is unjustified.

Exciting though news of a vaccine is, we still don't know if it will be the panacea we hoped for and it will come too late to save the high street from a meltdown. We've handed Christmas to Amazon on a plate.

Against such a sombre background, how are chief executives stepping up to lead and motivate colleagues through this stop/go scenario?

Dreams chief executive Mike Logue has created the Hub, an app that has been downloaded by 97% of colleagues. He uses it for updates – good news and bad – but it is accessible to everyone, to share successes and have fun, from celebrating birthdays to holding bake-offs.

He is confident Dreams will come through this even stronger and has invested in the business while some competitors have gone to the wall. Dreams acquired mattress specialist Feather & Black and will soon launch a value-led brand.

Encouraged by colleagues' suggestions on the Hub, the board has decided to award a one-off bonus to those who worked through the first lockdown while others were furloughed. While money is important, Logue says what motivates people is recognition and honesty.

He says: "Listen, respond and tell the truth – the vast majority will come with you."

### Keeping staff engaged

Co-op Food chief executive Jo Whitfield is also focusing on recognition and celebration, keeping energy levels up and making sure colleagues feel included, engaged and most of all, safe.

The top team is working hard on visible leadership – getting out to stores and DCs and ramping up initiatives that connect the brand so powerfully to the communities it serves, such as food waste, child poverty and supporting the Marcus Rashford campaign.

Whitfield understands that many forced to stay at home – whether shielding or protecting elderly relatives – miss human interaction, so wellbeing and mental health are now high on the agenda and "it's OK not to be OK".

Dixons Carphone chief executive Alex Baldock is well prepared for this second enforced closure.

In a strong message of confidence, no store staff have been furloughed and colleagues use ShopLive to demonstrate product features via a web link and operate a click-and-collect service whereby customers don't even have



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to leave the car – purchases are simply popped into the boot.

Baldock also espouses visible leadership – going out with delivery drivers and visiting depots and stores to ensure there is no feeling of 'them and us'.

He rightly says that a sense of purpose has never been more important. Storytelling shows how technology is enriching people's lives, from installing a new cooker for an elderly lady to rush-delivering laptops to a GP surgery "are the things that have meaning for our colleagues".

Like many fashion retailers, Jo Jenkins at White Stuff is angry at the mixed messages about who can trade and why. But she's preparing the business for an online Christmas.

Her message to the team is all about customer-centricity; virtual appointments in store, free home delivery, no-quibble extended returns and even curated drop-offs for valued customers.

As a leader, Jenkins recognises that her colleagues have been on an emotional journey – fatigued by endless Zoom meetings – and she's not shied away from opening up about how the pandemic has affected her personally. The BRC chief executive's update calls and camaraderie from the industry have kept her going.

The message is clear: be visible, communicate and tell the truth – a more inclusive style of leadership will get us through this together. **RW**