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**An assessment of the evolving post-COVID U.S. retail industry:
Strategic, competitive, and operational strategies to support small
retailer sustainability**

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An assessment of the evolving post-COVID U.S. retail industry: Strategic, competitive, and operational strategies to support small retailer sustainability

by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Program of Study Committee:
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The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this creative component. The Graduate College will ensure this creative component is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

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Abstract

COVID-19 significantly accelerated the U.S. retail apocalypse, defined by a severe decrease in the number of physical retail stores and intensive growth of e-commerce over the past decade. The pandemic compelled retailers of all sizes to reflect and modify their business models, including digital transformations. Due to COVID-19, retailers hastened the transition to digital practices and processes, and even traditional brick-and-mortar stores have had to adopt quickly to the online environment. Businesses without omnichannel strategies quickly adapted to online channels, in effort to provide customers with the same level of service and experience expected from physical stores. A recent retail industry survey revealed that offering an omnichannel experience to customers should be a priority for all retailers.

A series of four multi-part questions were addressed based on current industry and academic literature, concerning small retail competitive strategies and sustained operation in the post-COVID period. Resource-based view theory was used to support and explain recommendations for a hypothetical small retail boutique offering sustainable apparel and related goods. Six key actions were recommended for innovative small retailers to enhance the post-COVID customer experience, including: Increased focus on digital delivery methods, implementation of omni-channel (e.g. virtual appointments, virtual try-ons and customization), transformation of store operations (e.g. contactless self-service features), assessing the new role of offline stores, adoption of agile business models, and offering customers sustainable options (e.g. eco-friendly products and packaging). Strategies and tactics were suggested to improve the customer experience for the proposed retail boutique, enhance competitive advantages, and foster sustained operational success.

Creative Component Question 1:

Provide a concise overview of the current retail industry status in the U.S., including additional challenges posed by COVID-19. Also, suggest general strategic, competitive, operational, and managerial approaches and practices that would support the sustainability of a retail firm given the challenges you identify. Provide citations of key sources identified in your literature review.

Overview of the Current US Retail Industry

Given the highly competitive market in the U.S., the revolution of retailing had been witnessed in recent decades. The major transition in U.S. retailing was to adopt online channels as the primary business strategy in the past twenty years (Ansari et al., 2008; Chau et al., 2013). Researchers identified that the development of technology significantly influenced retailer's evolution (Iazzolino et al., 2017). The widespread of the Internet and the increasing Internet adopters resulted in the success of e-commerce. Fashion firms that traditionally sold products in brick-and-mortar stores started incorporating new online channels to meet diversified customers' needs and dynamic markets (Lee & Leonas, 2018). According to Digital Commerce 360's report, e-commerce's share of apparel sales had continually grown, from 29.9% of total U.S. apparel sales in 2017 to 34.0% in 2018 (Digital Commerce 360, 2020). In 2019, U.S. Census data revealed that online retail accounted for 11.812% of the \$506 billion spent in February, exceeded the offline sales at 11.806%, for the first time in the U.S. history (Min, 2019). Besides, the prevalence of mobile phone users contributes to the growth of m-commerce (Grewal et al., 2017). M-commerce had shown significant business potentials, although the innovation was developed in less than one decade (Dwivedi et al., 2017). M-commerce was estimated to reach

\$284 billion, accounted for 45% of the total U.S. e-commerce market, by the end of 2020 (Business Insider, 2020).

The technological advances also stimulate the shift into omnichannel retailing (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013). From multi-channel, cross-channel to omnichannel, the latter was identified as the best channel interaction and integration method. Omni-channel allows retailers to sell their products and service through all widespread channels and becomes more prominent in the U.S. retail environment (Beck & Rygl, 2015).

However, the novel coronavirus, known as COVID-19, has caused a disastrous impact on the retail environment. Since the most nonessential retailers began shuttering their doors in mid-March 2020, apparel companies such as Brooks Brothers, J Crew, and New York & Co have filed for bankruptcy in the early stage of the closure (Salpini, 2021; Davide et al., 2020).

COVID-19 has brought several challenges to the industry, especially for apparel stores sit inside the mall (Salpini, 2021). Shopping malls entered a stage of decline in the last decade due to the rising popularity of online retailing (Calvo-Porrall & Lévy-Mangin, 2019), and the pandemic exacerbates the crisis. For example, according to the report from Gap Inc, a 48% decline in physical store sales was influenced by partial closures during the quarter (Gap Inc, 2020). Gap Inc. was a fixture at shopping malls for decades, and now the company decided to shift to e-commerce business priority by closing 350 stores in North America by the end of 2023 (D'innocenzio, 2020). COVID-19 has forever altered the retail landscape. Until June 9, 2020, over 4000 stores in the U.S. announced to shut down permanently, and the estimated number of permanent store closures were 25,000 by the end of 2020 (Meyersohn, 2020).

In addition, the pandemic accelerated the trend of sustainability in the retail industry (McKinsey & Company, 2021). The growing concern for sustainability has been observed in the

past years. Giant retailers such as Athleta, The North Face, and Zara developed a long-term sustainability plan to fulfill the company's new goal. Triggered by COVID-19 and consumers' awareness of sustainability, more retail companies are in transition of sustainability (UNIDO, 2020).

General Approaches and Practices

COVID-19 accelerates the retail apocalypse, which refers to a severe decreasing number of physical retail stores and outstanding growth of e-commerce in the United States since a decade ago (Helm et al., 2020). The pandemic compels retailers to reflect and modify their business models, including operational business model innovation and digital transformation (Solis, 2021). In the next section, general approaches and practices are proposed for retailers to address the challenges brought by the pandemic.

Triple Bottom Line (TBL) Approach

A Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach was proposed by Elkington in 1994. Comparing to the traditionally financial-focused viewpoint, TBL captures the essence of business sustainability by measuring environmental, social, and economic performance. The TBL dimensions are referred as three Ps — profit, people, and the planet (Hall & Slaper, 2011). Based on the TBL framework, several practices to achieve sustained business in the post-pandemic era are presented below.

Economic: New Supply Chain Strategy

Apparel retailers are suggested to contemplate the inventory and risk management due to the weak supply chains brought by COVID-19. For example, PVH Corp. developed a new supply chain strategy that added closed storefronts to assist warehouses in shipping and fulfilling overwhelming online orders during the closure (Smith, 2021). Furthermore, well-used business

analytics could benefit retailers to measure supply chain activity, such as “customer demand, customer tolerance, supply shortages, localized outbreaks, over-inventory issues, and regulations for store operations” (Salfino, 2020). PVH Corp. also utilized technology to track the location of inventory and changes in demand; therefore, the company can quickly adjust the inventory list (Smith, 2021). In general, the pandemic has forced retail sectors to reconsider their distribution and transportation model. Creating a new adjustable and agile business model will help businesses minimize supply chain disruptions.

Economic: E-commerce & Omni-Channel Strategy

Due to the COVID-19 and following stay-at-home orders, retailers are urged to hasten up the transition to digital; even traditional brick-and-mortar stores have to adopt the online environment rapidly (Unglesbee, 2021). This transition will make a meaningful change in the future retail industry. Weinswig, the founder and CEO of Coresight Research, mentioned to Retail Dive:

"This tectonic shift in demand from offline to online will have major ramifications for retailers in 2021, as they adapt to accommodate this move to e-commerce. Nordstrom, for example, reported that the majority of its third-quarter sales (approximately 54%) were online, which has major implications for its store fleet".

Businesses without omnichannel strategies need to quickly adapt online channels, bringing customers the same level of service and experience as expected from physical stores (Meagher, 2021). For example, “Target’s online sales had 145% grown in 2020 because its omnichannel services played crucial roles in digital fulfillment” (Digital Commerce 360, 2021). The Voice of the Retail Industry Survey from Retail Dive revealed that offering an omnichannel

experience to customers is nowadays a retailers' priority (Bourlier, 2020). To do so, McKinsey & Company (2020) organized five key actions for omnichannel leaders to enhance customer experience (listed below).

- Increase focus on digital
- Implement innovation into omni-channel (For example, virtual appointment, virtual try-on, etc.)
- Transform store operations and provide safe environment (For example, contactless self-service features, sanitizer, etc.)
- Reassess the role of offline stores
- Adopt agile business models

Environmental: Sustainability Strategy

In light of consumers' sustainable consumption, retailers who don't have sustainability plans should develop new goals to match the customers' expectations. National Retail Federation (NRF) provides five practices for retailers (McKinsey & Company, 2021):

- Prioritize the goal of sustainability
- Develop a practicable plan and make commitment
- Adopt the industry-standard objectives, measurement techniques, and certifications
- Offer customers sustainable options (e.g., eco-friendly packaging)
- Collaborate with others, especially the supply chain
- Ensure the pricing can be accepted by customers

The sustainable practices not only benefit a company to achieve environmental sustainability, but also build economic sustainability. Take eco-friendly packaging as an

example. Eco-friendly packaging assists a business in a better environmental development while saving cost by using fewer materials on the packages. Given the (a) potential acceleration of sustainability transitions and (b) impact on economic performance, sustainability practices are essential for business sustainability.

Creative Component Question 2:

Choose an appropriate marketing theory, model, or framework (i.e., resource-based view, Porter's theory of competitive advantage, social capital, diffusion of innovations, or other as appropriate) to explain and support the strategic approach(es) you noted in Question 1 in a post-COVID environment for a hypothetical retail firm. You may specify the focus, location, and size of the hypothetical retailer. Discuss why and how this theory, model, or framework will provide appropriate strategic guidance for the direction and growth of this and other retail firms.

Resource-Based View

As an extension of Porter's five competitive forces (Porter, 1980), Wernerfelt (1984) proposed a resource-based view (RBV), an influential strategic management framework, for companies to achieve sustainable competitive advantages by analyzing and managing the resource positions. Resources, such as physical, human, or organizational capital resources, assist a firm in envisioning its strengths and then implement strategies that improve the effectiveness and effectiveness (Newbert, 2007; Barney, 1991). According to Barney's study, physical capital resources refer to a firm's physical technology, such as equipment and geographic location. Human capital resources are implied to employees' intelligence, training, or experience. A firm's

system or structure belongs to an organizational capital resource that leverages the organization's capability. Other researchers also inspected resources related to social capital or innovation (Campbell & Park, 2017). As Barney noted (1991), a firm's resources could be identified by four attributes: valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable. A resource would benefit a company to stay competitive in the market.

A Hypothetical Retail Firm: Green & Boutique

The hypothetical firm selected in this study is called “Green & Boutique.” Green & Boutique is a small sustainable boutique located in downtown Des Moines, Iowa. Green & Boutique was founded in 2018, and the total number of employees of the stores is 6. The spirit of Green & Boutique is to sell beautiful, timeless, and comfortable women’s clothes made from recycled materials and organic cotton. The sustainable accessories and small goods can also be found in Green & Boutique. Green & Boutique has its online shopping website and social media accounts on Facebook and Instagram.

Green & Boutique’s Resources

The RBV framework indicated that a corporation's success is built on well-used internal assets. As mentioned above, a valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, or non-substitutable resource is the strength of a firm to achieve a competitive advantage. For Green & Boutique, selling sustainable clothing is considered a unique and rare resource, given the few sustainable boutiques in Des Moines. People who care about sustainability would have a high interest in Green & Boutique. Furthermore, Green & Boutique is a small omnichannel retailer with the integration of online and offline channels, which is valuable. In other words, other small retailers who failed to provide customers better shopping experiences are in a disadvantageous place.

Green & Boutique's Strategic Approaches in the Post-Covid Environment

Green & Boutique's store is reopened in the post-pandemic environment after the state's government lifts stay-at-home policy. According to the RBV framework, successful performance can be predicted if a firm possesses a valuable resource. As mentioned above, Green & Boutique is a small sustainable clothing store in Des Moines. The sustainability apparel business is rare and valuable in the given area. An increasing number of consumers support sustainability during the outbreak of COVID-19, and this phenomenon is anticipated to continue in the post-pandemic era or further (IBM, 2020). Therefore, Green & Boutique has a competitive advantage by selling sustainable clothing. Besides, the capability of Green & Boutique to create community is an imperfectly imitable resource. The community of Green & Boutique sharing the same value and trusting and engaging with the brand is imperfectly imitable by other sustainable brands in the nearby area. Adopting the omnichannel approach is another valuable resource for Green & Boutique to achieve a competitive advantage in the post-pandemic environment. Even though the physical stores are reopened, some people keep their online shopping behavior after changing to online during the state's shutdown. Therefore, a firm's ability to adopt omnichannel is more competitive in the market (see question 1). After Green & Boutique reopened, online orders can be picked up in stores, and online promo codes can be applied to offline stores. Green & Boutique's ability to integrate multiple shopping channels offers customers better shopping experiences, a valuable resource that will lead to business success. Furthermore, to enhance the consumer shopping experience, Green & Boutique offers customization services such as altering clothes or creating own designs. The customization services are non-substitutable resources, which the competitors are difficult to find alternatives that bring customers benefits.

In conclusion, the RBV examined the relationship between an organization's internal characteristics and performance. For Green & Boutique, resources are valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable. These resources indicate the company's advantage in the dynamic market. The RBV framework could be utilized by not only Green & Boutique but other SMEs to achieve competitive advantages by exploring internal resources and organizational capabilities. The RBV guides enterprises to examine the positioning and develop strategies that lead to high returns, such as sales growth.

Creative Component Question 3:

Develop a modified version of a digital marketing plan for the same hypothetical retail firm that you described in Question 2. Assume that the firm needs to focus on: movement from brick and mortar only to multi-channel operation, integration of digital platforms, and modifying their practices to meet the needs of their customers in the presence of COVID-19.

The goal of digital marketing in this question is to increase the traffic and sales of Green & Boutique by maintaining current customers loyalty and raising awareness from the potential customers. In the following sessions, situational analysis and segmentation were first addressed to provide a basis understanding of the environment, economic, technological trend, market, and customers before conducting an appropriate digital marketing plan.

Situation Analysis

Environment

The majority of Green & Boutique’s customers live in Iowa. Customers who live in Des Moines or nearby areas prefer in-store shopping. Other residents use the online shopping website more frequently.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), the population of Iowa is 3,155,070, with 50% women. The largest ethnic group is White (85%), followed by Black or African American (4%), and Asian (2%). The age range is listed in Figure 1 below.

Des Moines has the most population in Iowa, with 214,237 out of 3,155,070. The largest ethnic group is White (75.8%), followed by Black or African American (11.4%), and Asian (6.2%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Women are 51% of the population of Des Moines. The age range is listed in Figure 2 below.

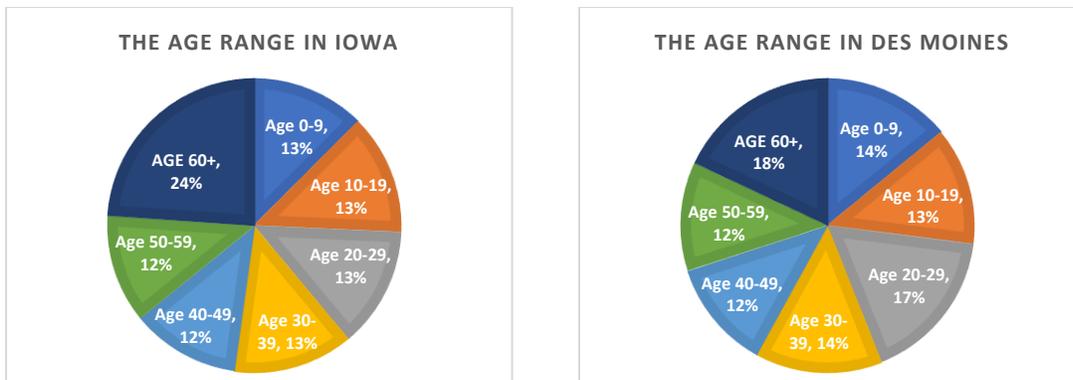


Figure 1. The age range in Iowa. Adapted from Census Reporter Figure 2. The age range in Des Moines. Adapted from Census Reporter

Economy

Retail sales in Iowa have gradually grown in current years. An annual report from the Iowa Department of Revenue (2021) reveals that the total retail sales tax in 2019 is 3,022 million dollars, comparing 2,327 million dollars in 2011. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in retail trade

also grows. Retail Trade increased \$0.200 billion (2.0%) in 2019 (Legislative Services Agency, 2020). GDP in retail trade was declined in 2020; however, a small growth has been reported in the first quarter of 2021 (Crumb, 2021). Although COVID-19 had a negative impact on Iowa's economy, the economy is forecasted to grow in/after the post-pandemic.

Technological Trend

A statistic report by Broadband Search shows that 95.6% of the population of Iowa accesses the Internet. With the wide coverage of the Internet, the population of social media usage has rapidly grown. Facebook is the most used social media platform across all the age groups in Iowa (BlueCompass, 2019). Over 70% of Gen Z, 88% of Millennials, and 80% of Gen X have Facebook accounts. Snapchat (45%) and Instagram (44%) are the second and third most-used platforms, followed by Twitter (36%). For the Millennials, Facebook and Instagram are their favorite social media sites. Gen Z prefers Snapchat and Instagram, and Gen X favors Facebook the most.

Competitive Analysis

I. Competitor's analysis

The competitors of Green & Boutique are sustainable/vintage/secondhand local boutiques in Des Moines, including MARNĒ, Kind Roots, Preservation, and WORN. The details of the strengths and weaknesses of Green & Boutique's competitors are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Strengthens and Weaknesses of Sustainable Local Small Businesses in Des Moines

Retailer	Products	Strengthens	Weaknesses
MARNĒ	Clothing, Accessories, Beauty, and Body & Bath	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimalist style • Active social media presence • Omnichannel (brick-and-mortar store, e-commerce, social commerce, and BOPIS) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimalist style ← Some people might find it too simple • Free shipping over \$150 • Price • Website (lack of size charts) • Low consumer engagement on Facebook
Kind Roots	Clothing, Accessories, Lifestyle, and Pets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community development (#kindrootscommunity) • Active social media presence • Omnichannel (brick-and-mortar store, e-commerce, social commerce, and BOPIS) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few products and styles • Low customer engagement on social media platforms • Website (lack of photo details)
Preservation	Clothing, Accessories, and Lifestyle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modern and vintage styles • Website (including photos details, product descriptions, size charts) • Active social media presence • Omnichannel (brick-and-mortar store, e-commerce, social commerce, and BOPIS) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Price • Free shipping over \$200 • Low consumer engagement on Facebook
WORN	Clothing and Accessories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designer and high-end fashion brands • Daily new arrival • Omnichannel (brick-and-mortar store, e-commerce, social commerce, and BOPIS) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Website (including website design, product descriptions, and size charts) • Low consumer engagement on social media • Limited size choices (one size available for each item) • Secondhand clothes ← Some people might not want to wear used clothes due to their own preference or potential stain/fading

II. Green & Boutique’s Opportunities and Risks Analysis Using a SWOT (Table 2)

Table 2

Green & Boutique SWOT Analysis

Strengthens	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Omnichannel services (brick-and-mortar store, e-commerce, and BOPIS) • Website (including photos details, product descriptions, size charts) • Sustainable packaging 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low consumer engagement on social media • Lack of social commerce • Lack of a strong relationship with the community
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trend of sustainability • Few competitors • Need of omnichannel • Popularity of social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncertain economic environment • Change in consumer behavior • Quick-change in fashion and style

Opportunity of Green & Boutique

For Green & Boutique, the first opportunity is a trend of sustainability. The apparel industry and customers have more awareness of sustainability issues currently (McKinsey & Company, 2021). Also, customers are looking for sustainable and local products to support small businesses, especially in the post-pandemic era (Accenture, 2020). Green & Boutique is a local small store providing (a) clothes made by sustainable fabrics and (b) services such as reusable shopping bags and compostable packages. Few competitors in this area are another opportunity for Green & Boutique. Living under the increasing attention of sustainability and few competitors, Green & Boutique have advantages in the market. Furthermore, a need for a business to offer omnichannel service has been highly highlighted in the retail industry as the outbreak of COVID-19 (Meagher, 2021). Green & Boutique has already adopted the online environment and integrated the shopping channels. The last opportunity is the popularity of social media. Over 231 million U.S. citizens have social media account, and the number of users

has risen by 7% between 2019 and 2020 (Dean, 2021). Social media becomes increasingly popular during the lockdowns, and this phenomenon is expected to continue after the virus is gone (Sheth, 2020).

Threats of Green & Boutique

The first threat to Green & Boutique is the uncertain economic environment. In the presence of COVID-19, businesses are still recovering from the disastrous impacts on the economy. Besides, the COVID variants, such as the Delta variant, might prompt another U.S. COVID-19 surge since the virus has spread out in 11 countries in 2021 (NPR, 2021). Considering the potential threat of the variant, it's unknown for the economic environment in the future. Another threat is a change in consumer behavior. According to McKinsey & Company's survey (2021), customers explore new stores and brands during the pandemic and are anticipated to keep the behavior (see details in Question 4A). This change jeopardizes brand loyalty, resulting in fewer consumers continually shop at the same stores. Furthermore, fashion constantly changes over time. The company that failed to sell trendy clothes to customers might be in a disadvantaged stage.

Marketing/Promotional Trends

I. Consumer Trend: Channel Preference

The consumer's favorite shopping channel has been shifted from brick-and-mortar stores to online recently. The global pandemic has accelerated the speed of the online transition. A report by Adobe Analytics showed that 48% fewer people shopped in brick-and-mortar stores on Black Friday in 2020, while online shopping surged 22% over the same period in 2019 (Thomas, 2020). Consumer's shift to the online channel can also be seen in the State of Iowa. The rising demand of new warehouses to accommodate online orders has been witnessed in Des Moines

(Kim, 2021). E-commerce is still a large driver of retail sales; however, some consumers might seek for in-store shopping experience after lockdowns ended (NRF, 2021).

II. Industry Trend: Digitalization and Mobile Commerce

The integration of digital technologies into retailing is not a new phenomenon (Egels-Zandén et al., 2016). However, the importance of digital transformation is becoming increasingly visible after the outbreak of COVID-19 (Soto-Acosta, 2020). A report from NRF revealed that 72% of retailers accelerated the progress of digital transformation by at least a year (2021). In the trend of digitalization, small businesses seize the opportunity by reporting a 300% increase in new signups to cyber-shopping software service, Ecwid E-commerce (Kim, 2020).

Mobile commerce (m-commerce) is becoming influential following the trend of digitalization and the widespread of smartphones. M-commerce attributes to over 280 million USD, with 45% total e-commerce sales in 2020 (Meola, 2020). The sales of m-commerce are expected to contribute more to e-commerce.

III. Marketing Trend: Social Media Marketing (SMM)

Social media has become one of the major marketing channels for retail companies in recent years. A forecast from Insider Intelligence indicated that the total social ad spending would increase 20% to \$43 billion USD in 2020 (Williamson, 2020). Especially for SMEs, social media is more influential because it allows the accessibility to large audiences at low costs (Muntinga et al., 2011).

Segmentation and Targeting the Consumer

Green & Boutique is a small local retail store selling sustainable women's clothes, accessories, and small goods in downtown Des Moines. Most customers of Green & Boutique are based in Iowa. In order to understand Green & Boutique's customers' needs, segmentation is

necessary. There are several ways of segmentation, and the most common types are demography, psychography, geography, and behavior (Matrin, 2011). Based on the behavioral aspect, Green & Boutique’s customers could be split by the level of brand loyalty. Customers whose brand loyalty is higher have repeat purchasing behavior. This group of customers shop very frequently and spend lots of money. Another group with the lower level of brand loyalty shops occasionally or only once at Green & Boutique. In addition, the potential segmentation of Green & Boutique is comprised of different degrees of consumer awareness of sustainability. Consumer awareness and commitment to buy sustainably have been boosted due to COVID-19 (Capgemini Research Institute, 2020). Therefore, the potentially profitable segment contains customers with an emerging awareness of sustainability and green consumption.

To further understand customers, the profiles of shoppers with the levels of brand loyalty is chosen to be analyzed (Table 3).

Table 3

Profiles of Shoppers with the Levels of Brand Loyalty

	Gen Z	Millennials	Gen X
Age	18-24	25-40	40+
Gender	Mostly Women	Mostly Women	Mostly Women
Income	Less than 20,000	20,000-50,000+	20,000-50,000+
Education Level	High school diploma and/or college graduate	High school diploma to postgraduate	High school diploma to postgraduate
Location	Inside or outside Des Moines	Inside or outside Des Moines	Mostly lives in Des Moines or nearby area
Product of purchasing	Black cut-off leggings, miniskirts, hoodies, and sweatshirts	Jumpsuits, cardigans, skinny jeans, blouses, and accessories	Sweaters, casual shirts, knee-length skirts, mid-dresses, and small goods
Preferred shopping channel	Social networking sites, online website, or mobile	Online website, brick-and-mortar store, or mobile	Mostly brick-and-mortar store

Level of brand loyalty	Lower	Higher	Higher
Population in the higher level of loyalty	Low	High	High
Frequency of green consumption	Emerging	Very frequently	Very frequently
Value of sustainability	Emerging	Very high	Very high
Primary digital channel for reaching	Social media and paid social media ads on TikTok and Instagram	SEO, social media, paid social media ads on Facebook and Instagram, email	Email

Gen Z has the lowest level of brand loyalty and frequency of green consumption. To raise awareness and increase loyalty, the visibility of the brand in the digital world is essential. Social media, paid social media ads, and SEO are recommended to reach the Gen Z group. Considering Gen Z is the most social media savvy, social media and the paid ads would be concentrated more. In addition, Gen Z prefers TikTok and Instagram, and Gen Z looks for fun, entertainment, and social activities on social media platforms. Interesting, engaging, and sharable content/videos on TikTok and Instagram are highly suggested to reach Gen Z.

Millennials prefer to shop via the online website and have a higher level of brand loyalty than Gen Z. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) would be mainly used to assist millennials in searching Green & Boutique’s website. Millennials would receive emails with new releases, promotions, and a website link. In this manner, the audiences are stimulated to shop more frequently. Moreover, Facebook and Instagram are millennials’ favorite social media sites (BlueCompass, 2019). Facebook and Instagram ads are effectively to reach more millennials.

Gen X also has a higher level of brand loyalty same as millennials. Based on the shopping behavior of this group, attracting Gen X to shop in the physical store is a key. Email is strongly recommended to target the group Gen X. By sending new releases, promotions, store

events, and a store locator, the audiences are motivated to visit the physical store to check the products and enjoy the services.

The Modified Digital Marketing Plan

In order to achieve the goal of increasing traffic and sales, Green & Boutique needs to (a) retain current customers and (b) raise potential customers awareness. Because of the trend of digitalization and social networking sites, the modified marketing plan is designed to integrate the digital marketing channels. Through the integration of digital channels, Green & Boutique could:

- Reach a wider audience
- Deliver message and make it more visible and impressive
- Enhance consumer shopping experience

For instance, Green & Boutique could use social media platforms to enhance people's engagement. Then, social media marketing campaign could be integrated into email marketing, providing customers a seamless experience. SEO could also be employed to increase the brand's visibility on the Google search page. In this way, Green & Boutique would be competitive in the market by integrating the digital platforms.

Creative Component Question 4:

4. A: Conduct literature search and provide a concise overview of changing consumer behavior in the post-COVID period. Provide citations of key sources identified in your literature search. Summarize your findings by providing a list of what you feel are 5 major changes in consumer behavior that will need to be addressed by retailers.

Overview of Consumer Behavior Change in the Post-Pandemic Era

In the post-COVID period, most consumer's habit is expected to return to normal, but some changes exist in the long term, turning a whole world into a "new normal" (Sheth, 2020). A survey from Forrester shows that only 16% of U.S. consumers intend to revert to pre-pandemic habits, and 75% of participants note that the pandemic will drive long-term changes in their behaviors and preferences (Lai, 2021). The first major shift is to switch the preferred shopping channels. Although the surge in e-commerce has been highlighted along with the widespread of the Internet in current years, e-commerce sales have grown two to five times faster during the global pandemic (McKinsey & Company, 2021). According to Kim's study (2020), "at least 66% of Gen Z, 68% of Millennials, 73% of Gen X, and 68% of Boomers" have adopted online apparel shopping because of the increasing time of using digital devices and smartphones (p. 214). The e-business continues to grow in the first quarter of 2021. In the U.S., e-commerce reaches \$196.66 billion, "up 39.0% year over year from \$141.52 billion in the same quarter of 2020" (Young, 2021). In the post-pandemic era, consumers still concern about convenience and safety; therefore, the shift to the online channel is keeping up for longer.

More consumers start utilizing omnichannel services. First, the delivery service of "buy-online, pickup-in-store" (BOPIS) becomes the consumer's primary delivery choice. Retailers such as Walmart and Target offer the BOPIS option, and BOPIS has surged 208% orders amid the pandemic (Berthene, 2020). A report from CommerceHub shows that "75% of consumers that subscribed to multiple delivery services, like Amazon Prime, said they would likely continue to opt for curbside delivery" even when the pandemic subsides (Jansen, 2020). Given the growth of online sales in the post-pandemic period, the number of customers using the BOPIS service is anticipated to grow. Another popular omnichannel service is social commerce. Social commerce

delivers e-commerce activities and transactions through social media platforms (Liang & Turban, 2011). Social commerce grows during the outbreak of COVID-19, and the popularity will remain in the future. From 2020, “43% of Gen Z and 49% of millennials have already made purchases directly from a social media platform” (Parisi, 2021). Social commerce sales are “expected to reach about 36 billion in 2021, representing 4.3% of all retail e-commerce sales” in 2021 (Lipsman, 2021). Social commerce is gradually shaping consumer behavior by providing other channel options.

The general change in shopping for new brands, sites, and retailers has been reported in the post-pandemic era in response to “economic pressures, store closings, and changing priorities” (Solis, 2021). According to McKinsey & Company’s survey (2021), 36% of consumers have already purchased from a new brand, and most of them are Gen Z and high earners. Besides, 73% of customers who try products from new brands during the pandemic intend to continue exploring (Solis, 2021). This general change in switching brands would jeopardize brand loyalty.

Furthermore, sustainable consumption has been accelerated in the post-pandemic era. In IBM’s study (2020), over 70% of customers value sustainability and are willing to pay more on eco-friendly products nowadays. Even when the pandemic subsides, 86% of US customers still value sustainable products (Genomatica, 2020).

Customers are also willing to shop and pay more to support local stores and small businesses (Accenture, 2020). Over 50% of consumers make a purchase on local products in the neighborhood in the wake of COVID-19 (Accenture, 2020). A study by Red Egg Marketing shows that 82% of shoppers prefer to shop at small local businesses, and 80% of the shoppers pay more for the products (2020). Consumer’s intention to shop locally would not be changed

despite the fact that the COVID-19 restrictions were eased (Accenture, 2020; Red Egg Marketing, 2020).

List of Five Major Changes in Consumer Behavior for Retailers to Address

- Online channels preference
- Growing demand for omnichannel services: BOPIS and social commerce
- Unstable brand loyalty
- Sustainable consumption
- Support to local/small business

4. B: Considering the major changes you noted above in consumer behavior, propose 5 viable digital and/or innovative marketing strategies for your hypothetical retail firm to be competitive in the post-COVID market. These strategies may have synergies for store, online, and other channels as you may suggest for this firm. Provide solid reasoning for your selection of each proposed strategy, based on literature search, and explain how the strategies may create competitive advantages for the small retail firm.

The five viable digital strategies are proposed to help Green & Boutique and other small retailers to stay competitive during this difficult time.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Most of the consumers continue online shopping behavior in the post-COVID period. A key to Green & Boutique's success is a good online presence. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) could be employed to enable Green & Boutique's web page visible on search engines like Google. According to the statistics from ProtoFuse (2014), more than 90% of people only look at

the first page of search results on Google. Therefore, using SEO to increase the ranking in search results for the keyword could direct more traffic to Green & Boutique's website. Another advantage for the small retail firm to utilize SEO is to save money. Traditionally, paid ads on the search engine are expensive, which SMEs usually spend \$9000 to \$10,000 per month on Google Ads (Maake, 2020). SEO can replace paid ads by empowering a steady stream of web traffic without a large number of costs.

Content Marketing

Content marketing is referred to as story marketing, aiming to raise/change audiences' awareness/perception of a brand by providing solid content (Sullivan, 2013). Content marketing also fosters customer engagement and loyalty (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). Instead of selling products, content marketing is more concentrated on developing consumer engagement, trust, perception of value, electronic word of mouth (EWOM), and relationships (Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). In view of the emerging change of green consumption, Green & Boutique could educate the audiences about the importance and impact of sustainability while showing one's efforts on sustainability practices in the content. Moreover, building relationships with locals/communities and retaining customers are challenging in the presence of post-pandemic time. Green & Boutique could utilize user-generated content (UGC) to establish a stronger community. For instance, Green & Boutique could:

- Create posts focusing on a shared images or videos
- Share/retweet customers' posts/stories on the official account
- Create hashtags like #Greenandboutiquetogether
- Create polls to get to know customers better and interact with them
- Create story highlights featuring UGC on Instagram

(The sample is included in Appendix A)

In this way, Green & Boutique is able to create a competitive advantage by building a strong community.

Social Media Marketing (SMM) Concentration

COVID-19 accelerates the use of social media among people in the U.S. and worldwide (Sheth, 2020). Andrew et al. (2021) pointed out that SMM becomes increasingly significant since the declaration of the pandemic. SMM allows a brand to be more visible while developing communication and interaction among users. Great SMM activities have positive impacts on brand awareness and brand loyalty (Bilgin, 2018). The first practice of SMM is to improve Facebook marketing. Facebook is the most popular social media site for all age groups in Iowa (BlueCompass, 2019). Green & Boutique could target the customers by posting videos and ads on Facebook (The sample is shown in Appendix B). Besides, the rising popularity of TikTok in Gen Z has been observed (Barnhart, 2021). Green & Boutique should create a TikTok account for targeting younger customers. Another practice is to monitor customers on each social media platform. Through measuring social media metrics, customer engagement and awareness can be analyzed (Chen, 2021). The insight of social media metrics benefits a small brand/retailer to understand customers' needs and reflect own performance.

Instagram Shop

Shop on Instagram is a set of features across the platform that users can browse and purchase products via a business's profile, Feed, or Stories (Instagram, 2020). Instagram is a new channel for social commerce which delivers e-commerce activities and transactions through social media platforms (Liang & Turban, 2011). Customers can purchase items by clicking the tag/sticker on the posts/stories, and the customers will be directed to the product page with "add

to cart” and “buy now” options. The Instagram Shop allows the users to complete the shopping process without leaving the app, offering a convenient and simple way for customers to buy products. From the business side, Instagram Shop brings more traffic and sales to the brand. Insider Intelligence (2021) predicted that the social commerce market would continue growing. Given the trend of social commerce in omnichannel in the post-pandemic environment, Green & Boutique and other small retailers are encouraged to implement the shopping feature on Instagram.

Email Marketing

Email marketing has been recognized as a high return on investment and cost-effective strategy (Aufreiter et al., 2014). The main goal of email marketing is to (a) turn new subscribers into loyal ones and (b) provide the loyal customers the news, personalized content, or coupons, that keep them shopping offline/online. According to Hubspot’s statistics, 59% of respondents place the order after receiving newsletters from the brands (2020). Although an online channel contributes large amounts of sales nowadays, a brick-and-mortar store is still important. Using email marketing is beneficial for Green & Boutique to bring traffic into not only an online website but an offline store. Through sending out information of new releases or in-store events, Green & Boutique could bring customers to the physical store. In this regard, Green & Boutique has the advantage of driving sales from multiple channels. The sample is shown in Appendix C.

Conclusion

Considering budget and potential effectiveness of digital marketing plans, SEO, content marketing, SMM, Instagram Shop, and email marketing are recommended for a small retailer to implement in the post-pandemic period. Among these strategies, content marketing and SMM are very effective in building brand community and loyalty. Through the well-used of UGC and

paid social media ads, customers are motivated to engage with the brand, leading to the development of community and loyalty. Besides, bringing customers back to the physical store is challenging, and email marketing could be helpful for a retailer. After customers receive the emails with information such as new arrivals, discounts, and store events, the customers would have a higher intention to visit the offline store. In this sense, the retailer becomes more competitive in the dynamic environment.

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Appendix A

Sample of Content Marketing on Instagram Using Green & Boutique

 **Green&Boutique**  · [Follow](#)
Des Moines, IA



Liked by xyz and 20 others
Green&Boutique LAVENDER DRESS 💜💜💜 for a summer date 💕
@mad_hatter0316 in @Green&Boutique new eco-friendly midi dress!!! Which is your fav color of summer dress 👗?

#Greenandboutiquetogether#Greenandboutiquecommunity#
View all 16 comments
 Add a comment...
6 August

Appendix B

Sample of Social Media Marketing on Facebook Using Green & Boutique

 **Green&Boutique** Like Page
Sponsored

Green&Boutique NEW ARRIVALS here! Your sustainable journey STARTS TODAY! Use code GREENTOGETHER for 15% off almost everything online.

Daisy Blue Midi Dress Shop Now
\$180

Froal White
\$135

 20 562 Comments 311 Shares

 Like  Comment  Share

Appendix C

Sample of Email Marketing Using Green & Boutique

Green & Boutique

NEW ARRIVALS | INSPIRATION | STORE LOCATOR



COLOR COLLECTION

- OH SPRING
- OH COLOR
- OH MY ADVENTURE

	<p>New Arrivals BOSS LADY PURPLE SUIT</p> <p>SHOP NOW</p>
<p>Monthly Favorites RED VIOLET RAFFLE SKIRT</p> <p>SHOP NOW</p>	
	<p>Online Deals Exclusive USE CODE: GBONLINE10</p> <p>SHOP NOW</p>

STORE LOCATOR

600 E Grand Ave
Downtown, Des Moines

LET'S GET SOCIAL!



WWW.GREENANDBOUTIQUE.COM