

Impact of the pandemic on rural shopping habits

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Researchers at the University of Southampton have explored how the pandemic has impacted the shopping habits and attitudes of consumers aged 65+ living and shopping in rural communities in the South of

England.

A series of practical recommendations to encourage older shoppers in rural areas back into local stores in the wake of COVID-19 have emerged from research commissioned by the National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE).

The research found that while many older shoppers were already returning to use rural retail stores, the majority also had similar concerns and apprehensions that prevented it being a 'normal' experience. For others, at the time of the survey in summer 2021, physical [shopping](#) remained a step too far, often for one or more of the reasons that were also inhibiting those who had already returned.

The findings led to seven recommendations for stores to help welcome more older shoppers back, make those who already had feel more comfortable, and encourage an improved experience for customers:

- Simply recognize that pandemic fear persists
- Maintain a physical distance
- Offer multiple modes of payment to reduce anxiety
- Encourage and facilitate [even more] personalized service interactions
- Mitigate against merchandise contamination
- Ask for feedback (and listen)
- Go the extra (delivery) mile

The recommendations have been welcomed by the Association of Convenience Stores (ACS) and they are feeding into the development of its guide 'Everyone Welcome: How to Make Your Store Inclusive for All' to signpost retailers towards the practical measures and approaches to [customer service](#) they can deliver in-store.

Report authors Dr. Rob Angell, Associate Professor of Marketing Research, and Mr Janusz Swierczynski, Research Assistant were invited to attend the launch of ACS' Rural Shop Report 2022 (25 January). Dr. Angell said: "Consumers aged 65 and over are, and will remain, an important market segment when measured by size, growth and financial resources. Coupled with the older demographic often using shopping as an activity beyond utility, and thus as a vehicle for socializing and meeting other people, shopping therefore has both economic and wellbeing value to business, consumers, policy makers, and society-at-large.

"Our research focused on how older shoppers really feel about shopping at rural retail stores and, while our findings pertained to people's attitudes towards shopping in physical locations more generally, also captured specific aspects of the store environment and experience that impacted if, and how, they shopped.

"In the main, these findings also represented several barriers, but also opportunities for retailers to resolve and we hope that they, thanks to our support from the ACS, will take note in order to improve the shopping experience for older customers."

ACS chief executive James Lowman said: "Local shops operate in the heart of our communities and are a lifeline for their customers, particularly those who may be more isolated or vulnerable, and this has been keenly felt throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Convenience retailers have been working tirelessly to ensure that they can continue to serve their communities safely and effectively, from introducing social distancing measures and limiting the number of shoppers in [store](#) to offering grocery delivery services for those who cannot get to their local shop.

"We welcome the recommendations made by NICRE which aim to

provide stores with practical tips on how they can encourage older shoppers in [rural areas](#) back into local stores. These are simple steps that retailers can take to provide their customers with additional support and increase their confidence when shopping."

The report comes as Rural England publishes its State of Rural Services Report 2021 which found that through the pandemic small, local-based food stores were highly valued by rural residents and the switch to more cashless payments was boosted.

More information: Report:

www.ncl.ac.uk/mediav8/nicre/files/NICRE

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Provided by University of Southampton

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