

THE RETAIL WORLD 2020

RETAILING IN A TIME OF CRISIS



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LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVES: HANI WEISS, CEO, MAJID AL FUTTAIM RETAIL



Spencer Stuart's Sally Elliott interviews Hani Weiss – CEO, Majid Al Futtaim Retail – to expand on his contribution to the leadership session at World Retail Congress. Connected on what he learned about his team and his own leadership during COVID-19.

One of the first things that leaders have to do is to set the vision, purpose and values for an organisation. Did you find it necessary to change this for Majid Al Futtaim in any way in light of the crisis?

COVID-19 has tested our communication skills in a way that many leaders have not yet faced in their careers. So, this is unprecedented. And you know, the current crisis has required effective leadership and strong communication skills - literally from minute to minute.

Our purpose, as a grocery retailer, has been to ensure that customers can continue to get the products they need when they need them at an accessible price. This remained constant throughout the crisis. This purpose has enabled us to unify our teams and to explain the importance of their work, cultivating engagement and loyalty. The same purpose has shaped our conversations with suppliers, partners, distributors and government. And, our customers received a letter from me asking them to shop responsibly while also reassuring them that we have everything they need for today and tomorrow. Purpose was and is the main thing in everything we do in terms of communication.

How did you align your top team and ensure that you had the right resources in the right places?

I never felt more connected with the team, especially the top team, than during these challenging times. We formed a “nerve centre”, meeting daily, to exchange information so that we had one source of truth to inform and make decisions collectively.

We were much more active in our decision-making versus normal times. During the pandemic, it has been effective and fast. Forget about the old days where it takes weeks and months to implement change. We were taking decisions in the morning that were implemented in the afternoon in our stores and online.

In less than a fortnight, we redeployed over 1,000 employees from Majid Al Futtaim's leisure and entertainment divisions to work in our grocery business. We also redeployed colleagues from physical stores that had reduced or suspended opening hours to help with online order processing. This increased our fulfilment capacity five-fold.

In terms of your leadership approach, is there anything that you will take from this challenging period and continue?

The name of the game for me is adaptability and agility. And I intentionally put adaptability first. We need to make sure that we adapt ourselves to the current circumstances, or anything else that may come. The retail sector, in general and worldwide, has done fantastically well during this pandemic.

How did you inspire people at all levels of the organisation to go the extra mile?

We felt very much responsible for engaging with all of our stakeholders – customers, suppliers, communities and especially with our colleagues – to achieve our goals.

I encouraged all of our top leaders to visit our colleagues in stores and fulfilment centres, to celebrate success and to tell them how important their roles are during this pandemic.

This has been a time where communication with team members has been the most consistent and straightforward of any point that I have known in my career - without filters, from top to bottom of the organisation. We have held monthly virtual business updates, with 16 markets taking part, sharing successes and best practices, as well as asking me live questions directly.

What are the actions that you're taking as chief executive to ensure the organisation continues to adapt on an ongoing basis?

Majid Al Futtaim continues to focus on digital transformation and data analytics that allow us to pivot effectively again and again. To remain relevant beyond the pandemic, this ability to transition to omnichannel and to scale effectively is vital.

We are using a range of analytics tools to drive our business in the areas of business intelligence, extended intelligence and artificial intelligence. For example, we now leverage dashboards that provide critical KPIs, support with planogramming and replenishment, and personalised recommendations for customers through our Carrefour app and marketplace. We also developed click and collect, adding over 44 new fulfilment centres. This has included a 5,000 square metre fulfilment centre built from scratch in the Dubai desert – inside a tent!



What advice would you have for retail leaders right now?

As leaders in the retail sector, our job is to communicate clearly and to express complex ideas in a simple way, sharing information with a multitude of audiences. We have to be able to handle a huge information flow, and to operate equally well at 60,000 feet as at 10,000 feet. Our view is that communicating clearly and transparently, with purpose and authenticity, is one of the most critical attributes for a strong leader.

I would also say that this new normal means we need to double down on digital and deploying technology to be more effective and agile in serving our customers, including developing the omnichannel experience. Since the pandemic, we have found ourselves trying to implement in 12 days what we wanted to achieve in 12 months.

Final question. How optimistic do you feel about the future and the future for retail?

The future sometimes feels like it is no more than one to three months away right now. I believe this is a great moment to reshape the retail sector. We have an opportunity to resize stores, to reimagine the store of the future and to accelerate the way that online will complete offline, creating a seamless experience for our customers. As leaders, we need to be optimistic for our teams and to carry on innovating. I would say we are very well placed to reshape the retail industry and to be very proud of what we're going to achieve in the future.



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