

Covid-19 pandemic: Should brands be doing more?

By [Richard Wells](#)

17 Jun 2020

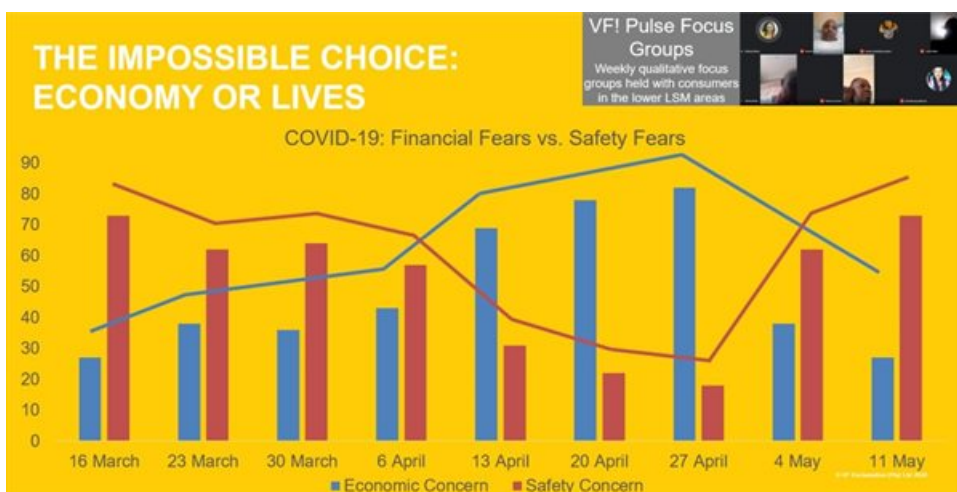
President Cyril Ramaphosa's letter to the nation on Monday 8 June, painted a grim picture of the expected coronavirus statistics. His [clarion cry](#) to "be prepared" lands heavily on a nation already burdened by shattering unemployment, food queues, business closures and fear of the future.



Richard Wells, CEO of VFI

It is telling that the weekly responses we receive to the question "what is your primary anxiety – financial security or health and safety?" that we put to our low-income shopper panelists have shifted notably.

At the start of the lockdown, the axis was heavily weighted to health and safety. As April drifted into May, this inverted where financial security became the pressing issue of the majority. Over the last few weeks, the balance has shifted significantly back to health and safety.



Credit: VFI

Stores in more affluent suburbs are more geared up to protect shoppers; sanitisers are extensively used, social distancing protocols are practiced and protective guards are in place at tills and counters.

Are the standards as high at stores in lower-income areas? In brief, no.

Shoppers at risk

Over the last week in May, our research team visited townships in Gauteng and the Western Cape, auditing 100 independent retail outlets.

The results relating to safety protocols were deeply concerning with only 24% operating under any health and safety systems. Yet these stores were busy, with sales of essentials trading well. Our findings echoed feedback from independent store distributors of CPG products which reported unexpectedly positive numbers in May.

So, if sales are not being hampered by poor health and safety protocols, yet large numbers of shoppers remain exposed to the health risks the President is warning against, the question needs to be asked: should brands be doing more in these channels? In my opinion, most definitely.



In the "new normal" to come, will plans conceived pre-Covid still be relevant?

Richard Wells 12 May 2020



Responsibility to step up

News of Distell providing sanitisers to 30,000 taverns is one such positive example of what brands can do but it shouldn't stop here. Solutions are needed for all independent retailers to gain access to protective guards, self-administered sanitisers, queue spacing tools and protocol instructions. This presents a pro-active opportunity for businesses to pivot and support these needs, as many have done.

We estimate that there are some 150,000 retailers and an estimated 200,000 taverns and shebeens operating in low-income areas, where over 25% of the working population are employed, contributing to almost 10% of SA's GDP (SA Local Economic Development Network 2017). Is it right that such a significant number of shoppers and traders are operating without adequate health and safety protection?

All of us who generate an income through retail have a responsibility to respond to the President's exhortation and support the sector to "be prepared".

VF! continues to conduct research into SA retail throughout the lockdown period and will be sharing more insights over the coming weeks.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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