

# Indicators

Coronavirus  
**COVID-19**

Early clues on the post-crisis consumer & market realities  
April 15<sup>th</sup>

## #7 Risky Business

Shoppers are shying away from produce  
on open display and touchable

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# #7 RISKY BUSINESS

## Shoppers are shying away from produce on display for all to touch

Coronavirus (Covid-19) is causing untold tension in every aspect of our lives and shopping is no different. The wonderfully appetising displays of culinary delights we love to engage with in stores, deli counters and other food service outlets; to touch, smell and taste are on hold for now.

Shoppers are avoiding unpackaged produce to avoid the risk of contamination and we have seen the stores reacting to this already, with the fresh bakery offerings packaged and over-the-counter produce sealed and protected from human contact. According to Jon Bird in Forbes *“Shoppers today don’t want to touch anything apart from their own mobile phones (which, somewhat ironically, can be “10 Times Dirtier Than A Toilet Seat”).*

While this seems like a severe response, microbiologist Charles Gerba thinks they’re right claiming that the fresh produce area is among the “germiest” areas of the grocery store; “I don’t know anyone who buys produce without squeezing or touching it,” says Dr Charles Gerba Microbiologist

The rise of “**NO TOUCH RETAIL**” has important implications for retailers and food producers, in particular in sectors like bakery, fresh produce and fresh meats. It has big implications for packaging – an already vexed question for retailers, consumers and producers. And it is also worth considering the impact on product sampling and promotion among other aspects of the shopping experience.

We’re calling this indicator RISKY BUSINESS.

# #7 RISKY BUSINESS

## What is the risk?

At the outset of the crisis here in Ireland the Behavioural Research Unit at the ESRI identified seven issues worth considering in 'fighting the coronavirus'. Number seven on that list was RISK PERCEPTIONS. And its to risk perceptions we turn to explain what we mean by RISKY BUSINESS.

Perceptions of risk are easily biased. Overstating or understating a risk can result in people making choices that have a negative outcome. That's because perceptions of risk DOES drive behaviour. People judge the likelihood of an outcome partly by how easily it springs to mind; this is an **availability heuristic**, also known as **availability bias**, it is a mental shortcut that relies on immediate examples that come to a given person's mind when evaluating a specific topic.

Today in the midst of the pandemic shoppers 'risk assessments' are heightened. Is there evidence that Covid-19 will survive on a baguette or loaf of bread on display in a store? Possibly not. But because of the availability heuristic – shoppers defer to an outcome that does spring to mind: "I've heard the virus can last 24 hours on door handles", "I've been told to wash the wrapping on my shopping when I get home". The closest available evidence would suggest its better to be safe than sorry.

Shoppers have been told to mitigate risk by washing their hands. They've been told not to wear face masks, then possibly that they should wear face masks. They've been told to mitigate the risks. Food, on display out in the open, always something that needed careful handling, now needs even more careful handling...

# #7 RISKY BUSINESS

## Tackling the concerns

In response, Supervalu stores in Ireland have been highlighting their “wrapped in store” assurance at their bakery section. But it’s not just bakery. With the NHS recommending that UK shoppers wash fresh fruit and vegetables, many are opting for packaged options instead.

A Reuters report by Richa Naidu claims that “U.S. shoppers are avoiding touching fresh fruits and vegetables in grocery stores and stocking their pantries with pretzels, powdered milk, canned meat and other packaged food”. They observe that at Fairway market in Manhattan’s Upper West Side, shelves normally filled with prewashed lettuce sold in plastic containers were bare on Sunday morning. By contrast, there was plenty of loose lettuce for purchase.

This phenomenon has prompted producers groups to reassure shoppers that it is safe to buy fresh produce. One such initiative was launched by United Produce including a dedicated website ([here](#)).

The National Grocers Association which represents over 8,000 stores in the US says its members are packaging bakery items that are usually loose in bins, such as fresh doughnuts and pastries (CNBC).

# #7 RISKY BUSINESS

## The Safety v Sustainability Conundrum

With sustainability and packaging playing an increasing role in consumer's choices, RISKY BUSINESS introduces an unwelcome element to the food chain mix – **MORE PACKAGING & MORE WASTE**. As recently as September 2019 Globaldata research showed that 71.4% of consumers said they consider the environmental impacts of their choice. Now, their fears and risk-mitigation, will see many consumers having to embrace something none of them want to.

The move to **NO-TOUCH** retail presents an interesting conundrum in this regard and a challenge of brands in affected sectors who want to behave sustainably. This will be a tension that will have to be resolved for the future if this phenomenon sticks. And RISKY BUSINESS feels like one indicator that could STICK:

“On the other side of this [crisis], are people going to be a lot more careful? The answer is yes. Are people's radar for hygiene going to be more heightened? The answer is yes. Are we going to recognize that being prepared for stuff like this is eminently more important, and that we need a renewed focus on people keeping healthy? Yes.”

- PACO UNDERHILL\*

Source: \* <https://www.uschamber.com/co/good-company/launch-pad/coronavirus-and-hygiene-affect-sales-techniques>

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March 31<sup>st</sup>

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### Implications for Food and Beverages

- **A challenge to maintain the multi-sensory appeal of produce in a no-touch world**
- **Ways to create a new theatre for fresh produce to showcase these products**
- **Innovations that deliver these solutions in a way that is sustainable**
- **A new commercial model for retailers and business owners**
- **A challenge for in-store sampling in this environment**

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