

HFMA Bulletin

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Some thoughts on 'the new normal'

I'm sure many of you are tired of reading about the coronavirus pandemic, but I'm going to write about it anyway because I'm intrigued by the rather sinister term 'the new normal'. To me this implies great change while at the same time reassuring you that we'll adjust to it as 'normal'. But things will be a long way short of normal well into next year, so what does the new normal look like for the supplement industry and for health food stores?

Starting with a big positive, it was fantastic to see health food stores were designated as essential and permitted to stay open during the shutdown. This felt like official recognition of the role our industry plays in helping to keep the nation healthy.

However, for many stores the good news quickly turned sour as the reality of empty high streets sunk in – no one in the town and no customers to sell to. Of course, some stores fared better than others, often a reflection of how local their customer base was, with inner city stores that rely on commuters often struggling the most. Other enterprising stores arranged deliveries to their customers, some even offered versions of click and collect to minimize personal contact.

There has also been a lot of talk about stores starting their own e-commerce websites, but here I recommend caution because although a few loyal customers might use the site, these won't cover the set-up costs. And if online customer recruitment is the ambition, remember you're up against Amazon!

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So, what will the new normal be for health food stores? I for one remain optimistic for our industry because we're entering a new era where health is at the forefront of everyone's mind. Food supplements have been given a major boost to their credibility with official endorsement of the importance of vitamin D. This led to booming sales of this supplement as well

as the other 'classic' immune products such as vitamin C, garlic and echinacea. And now vitamin K has joined the list. It's apparent that millions of non-supplement users have suddenly seen the light and taken supplements for the first time. I know two previously sceptical individuals, both medics,

who are now fervently in favour of supplements. In fear of getting ill themselves they researched the published data, realized that the benefits of supplements go deeper than just immune system support, and now report feeling more alert, sleeping better and having more energy.

We must all try to build on this new wave of enthusiasm for supplements, and health food stores will play a key role in this as customers who are new to supplements need lots of advice and guidance. We need to keep highlighting the scientific evidence of micronutrient deficiencies in the population and the positive effects that supplements can have. The shape of the High Street may well change in the future but hopefully the public's new interest in health will drive them to the one place where they can get informed, free and sensible advice on nutrition – their local health food store.

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