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**Business Analysis**

# 8 Ways COVID-19 Will Impact the Future of Interior Design

Experts weigh in on how the industry will evolve in a post-pandemic world

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May 4, 2020

The allure of gazing into a crystal ball isn't so much about seeing the future of design as it is about knowing how to prepare for it. To that end, AD PRO asked a number of experts to detail how they think **COVID-19** will impact key aspects of interior design, from **pricing** and communications strategy to **color trends** and trade shows. Their honest responses paint a picture of a changed yet enduring industry that will continue to thrive—even in the aftermath of a crisis.

**Product Development**

“We know from prior challenging times that when the going gets tough, be creative,” says Scott Hudson, CEO of [Henrybuilt](#). “There isn’t going to be a lot of surplus capital to work with for most companies, so product development may slow down. But [designers](#) thrive in constrained situations like this. I wouldn’t be surprised if some of the best work done in a long time happens in the next couple of years.”

Brands that depend on retail will need to continue developing their core product. Catherine Bailey, creative director and co-owner of [Heath Ceramics](#), says her company relies heavily on its four brick-and-mortar stores; its revenue dropped overnight by 85% when they closed. “Demand and customers will be changed when we reopen,” she says, adding that production facilities will be leaner, teams will be smaller, and product offerings will be simpler—a trend that could be seen across the board.

John Christakos, cofounder of [Blu Dot](#), took a similar financial hit when its physical stores shuttered in mid-March. “Sadly, I think [the virus] might eliminate some of the young brands that have emerged in the last few years,” he says. “COVID-19 may influence what people work on in the future, but I wouldn’t imagine in a very significant way. At Blu Dot, we’re going to stay true to who we are and not overcorrect to this event.”

## **Pricing**

Holly Howard, founder of the business consultancy [Ask Holly How](#), has two words for creatives who are considering lowering their prices: Be careful. “Much of the wealth—especially the customer base that a lot of designers serve—has not disappeared,” she says, underscoring that affluent individuals will maintain a high level of wealth and will spend accordingly. “Most developers will see a future full of opportunities when the landscape clears of businesses that didn’t survive. Where there will be a struggle around pricing and money has more to do with relationships over the actual ability to invest.”

A more pressing issue will be designers’ ability to justify their services’ worth in a meaningful way. “Pricing your services is not just determined by what the industry standard is or what the market will bear—it’s also about perceived value,” Howard says. “That’s what I see the design community struggling with: Understanding how to translate the impact of their work to a dollar amount that resonates with their consumer.”

## **Client Spending**

Post-pandemic consumption looks hopeful to financial advisor Jared Miller, who shepherded many design firms through the 2008 [financial crisis](#). “Interior design is a discretionary item, something easy put on hold,” he says. “But as soon as there is some certainty—and in this case, certainty means the sense that there is a vaccine—things will start to calm down. They always do.” He anticipates a “pent-up demand” for design services. “There will be a surge in purchasing once the economy is back,” Miller says. “A lot of the purchases that would have been made—plus all of the purchases that would normally have been made—are still going to happen.”

Katie Saunders, founder of [Pop and Grey](#), a brand design and strategy firm for interior designers, thinks people will want to invest in their residences more than ever. “The post-COVID client will be more attuned to flaws in their homes after spending such a long time locked up in them,” she says. “Suddenly the little annoyances they’ve overlooked for years will become big things that must be fixed now—and they’ll be willing to pay a premium to have it done right.”

## **Color Trends**

“In order for a color to gain traction and popularity, it first has to accurately reflect consumer attitudes,” says [PPG Paints](#)’ senior color marketing manager, Dee Schlotter. “The pandemic has understandably spurred a feeling of unrest, grief, and anxiety among consumers, who are now craving colors that instill a sense of reassurance and comfort.” Even as shelter-in-place orders lift, she continues, consumers will take a closer look at their homes, how they function, and how they can transform them into a sanctuary in these uncertain times. Schlotter expects to see more biophilic design—a gravitation toward hues that mimic the sensation of being in nature—in city-dwellers’ spaces in particular. “These colors promote internal peace in an age where mental and physical well-being are critical,” she says.

## **Studio Operations**

In day-to-day internal activities, design firms will lean on their coworkers and community, predicts Cheryl Durst, executive vice president of [IIDA](#). “As designers and design professionals, we are accustomed to putting humans and their needs first,” she says. “In this brave new world, we’ll see that the skills and abilities design affords to us—empathy, curiosity, patience, common sense, problem-solving—are more crucial than ever.”

But interior designers who recently started their own firms will need to be more self-reliant, says [Matthew Kowles](#), who launched his eponymous company in March. His biggest challenge? “Fear,” he says. “I’ve had to separate the fear of the coronavirus from the fear of economic stand-still. They are not the same.” Kowles anticipates that

younger firms will emerge as more financially mindful practices. “It won’t surprise me if the future generation, myself included, focuses on recession-proofing their businesses and what overhead is truly essential. Shared offices, online conference platforms, digital presentations, and world-wide express shipping are going to be hot commodities.”

## Workspace

Offices will undoubtedly transform in the near and distant future, says Kelly Griffin, a principal at the architecture firm [NBBJ](#) who leads its workplace strategy group. “Offices may evolve to become more intentional, meaning that much of the heads-down work will happen at home and the physical workplace becomes a place to connect with others, leading to increased social space, amenities, and conference rooms,” she says. And the physical office is here to stay. “Office culture will remain an integral part of the employee experience for most companies,” Griffin says. “We can specify materials that are non-porous, easy to clean, and reduce the likelihood of infection, but the safest workplaces will be those that follow the guidelines of local health officials. An integrated approach of policies, operations, and personal responsibility will be required.”

[RCH Studios](#)’ creative director Andy Lantz, who’s designed offices for Dropbox and VRBO, says companies will need to integrate workplace changes in ways that reflect living in a post-COVID world. “When a situation feels temporary, it feeds fatigue because everyone remains in a holding pattern. That energy should be used to develop new patterns and rituals,” he says. “The challenge is to integrate design thinking, albeit measured and smart, that aren’t temporary measures. Make it real.”

## Trade Shows

“We were supposed to be in [Milan](#) this month,” says Claire Pijoulat, who founded [WantedDesign](#) with Odile Hainaut in 2011. “We miss our international friends, some of whom we only see once or twice a year. On the other hand, Milan had become almost too much. It was overwhelming. We might go back next year and see a more distilled version.”

But Pijoulat doesn’t see trade shows going away anytime soon. “The design fairs won’t disappear,” she says. “They’re a key part of our industry. Some shows might have virtual components, but at the end of the day, we need human connection and human touch.” The pandemic will force the industry to invent new models, tools, and platforms for its programs, she continues. “It won’t be about the size of your booth or how high and thick your walls are. It’ll be about the story you’re bringing to life and who is behind the projects the brands are presenting.”

## Communications Strategy

To [Novità PR](#) founder Christine Abbate, the way designers talk to clients, and the messages their work conveys, will radically evolve. “It will be a different world when we get to the other side of this crisis,” she says. Having spent the last several weeks creating virtual press conferences, IGTV designer interviews, project videos, and digital desk-sides for clients, she predicts a more digitally savvy design community and thinks empathy will be key. “It will be important that designers be sensitive in their tone and outreach,” she says. “Understanding their clients’ challenges and offering extra consulting hours will help them plan for the near- and long-term future.”

“Owned content is going to be even more important for designers and brands to invest in,” forecasts Etosha Moh, senior vice president of [the Consultancy PR](#). She thinks that compelling images—lifestyle and product shots for brands, a full suite of project images for designers—will be imperative for the post-pandemic firm. Video assets will be valuable resources for designers’ portfolios, and for brands, a strong digital presence will be an essential investment to grow for businesses that historically relied on physical retail locations. “We don’t know how this pandemic will progress or what seasonal impacts there will be,” Moh says. “One thing we can count on: There will be a lot of innovation in our industry as a result.”