

# A Reflection on Practical Innovation Beyond COVID-19

Bettine Ortmann

*Copenhagen School of Design and Technology (KEA)*

### Abstract

During COVID-19 and with the help of 80 students from the Entrepreneurship & Design programme of Copenhagen School of Design and Technology, we developed an innovation project within retail. The specific goal of the project was to develop a guide on how to use the physical space as a brand channel when commerce and transactions are going digital. The project resulted in the development of a new model—The DEAL Model. We tested the model together with 6 retail brands and a team of students. The learnings from the project were multiple: from using new digital tools for research and collaborations to how students can be motivated through close collaboration with real life case companies.

### Keywords

Innovation during COVID-19, Student involvement, Retail, Physical space, Brand Channel

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### Author Note

**Bettine Ortmann** MBA is a lecturer at Copenhagen School of Design and Technology (KEA).

### Introduction

In January 2020, I kicked off the research for an innovation project at the Copenhagen School of Design and Technology (KEA). I went to the National Retail Federation (NRF) in New York together with 40,000 other curious practitioners and

academics wanting to explore the latest trends within retail. Commerce was going online—the landscape of physical retail was changing dramatically from places of transactions to spaces for experiences. Physical experiences that called for a totally new approach to retail. The scope of my innovation project was to get insights into this trend and best practices and to develop an intuitive and easy guide on how to use the physical space as a brand channel. I was highly motivated to embark on the research project—my biggest challenge was to find time for doing all the research. My spring was jam-packed with physical lecturing and other stuff going on. Then COVID-19 hit the world.

This paper will explore how the research was carried out in the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment beyond COVID-19 with the help of 80 students from KEA's programme in Entrepreneurship & Design, how new ways of distance working and new tools were implemented overnight, and how we (almost) succeeded in doing a very hands-on three-dimensional case study for six case companies.

We live in a VUCA-World. The term VUCA was first coined in 1985 by economists and university professors Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus in their book “Leaders: Strategies for Taking Charge” and was originally used to describe conditions resulting from the Cold War. VUCA is an acronym for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. And that was certainly the situation at KEA and in the rest of the world in spring 2020<sup>1</sup>.

### The Scope

At KEA, research and innovation are an important part of our work as lecturers. This must be done in close collaboration with the business community. We must ensure that the research projects are relevant to the business community. Furthermore, it is important that the generated project output is of interest to the

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1 <https://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/VUCA-volatility-uncertainty-complexity-and-ambiguity>

business community and that companies subsequently can be inspired by our work and implement some of the tools we use in practice.

Digital commerce is growing year by year and continuously sets new records. In recent years we have seen a decline in customer traffic to the physical stores, and more and more physical retailers have had to shut down due to lack of turnover. More and more retailers are now turning their physical spaces into experience places, showrooms, and other forms of brand-focused places. And while traditional retailers have been busy jumping on the trend of digital commerce, retailers born digital have started to open up physical spaces where they can stage their products and brands. But how do they do that? What practices and processes are necessary to follow and implement to succeed in this field?

My innovation project was set out with the scope of exploring: How can brands and retailers best use physical space as a brand channel?

The scope of the project was to give an overview of the most important retail trends and explore why and how retailers and brands use the physical space as a branding channel beyond digital commerce. The aim was to develop a knowledge product with highlights of best practices and preliminary findings and guidelines. The ultimate goal was to come out with a “how-to guide” to inspire practitioners, academics, and students with interest in the field of physical retail and branding.

## The Process

The project was planned according to KEA's best practices for research and innovation projects in three phases. The project was to be implemented in 2020 and 2021. See [Figure 1](#).

Parallel with my work with the innovation project, I was part of the teaching staff at KEA responsible for our students at Entrepreneurship and Design. In the spring of 2020, we had planned a course on experience design where the students had to work hands-on with physical installations at the 48-hour festival at Nørrebro in Copenhagen. The spread of COVID-19 in

Denmark meant that on March 11th, 2020, the government shut down education, day-care institutions and schools. At KEA, all students and teachers were initially sent home the March 11th until March 30th, 2020. This date was subsequently postponed several times. We were forced to change plans, implement new tools and ways of working, all with a short notice and with the restriction that we had a number of learning goals that had to be complied with whatever we came up with. This was certainly a VUCA-WORLD entering KEA—some would call it a crisis.

## The Opportunity

In Chinese, crisis means both danger and opportunity, and for my innovation project, which was just about combining branding theory and experience design, it became a great opportunity. An opportunity to get help with establishing a solid knowledge base through a major research project involving the students.

The opportunity was reached through the introduction of a new teaching module: Branding in the physical space. 80 students from KEA's programme in Entrepreneurship & Design got involved as researchers and helped exploring trends and best practices within retail. The research job could be done in small groups with a lot of desktop research and interviewing brands and retailers from home. To make sure we did cover all our learning goals, we also introduced a new teaching module that was planned to take place late in 2020, which we also called “Branding in the physical space.” Here the idea was to get the hands-on part covered, inviting real brand cases in to test the outcome of the research project, our methods from best-practice experiences and the upcoming and newly developed guide of how to best use the physical space as a brand channel.

## The Task

The first course was planned as a three-week process in which the students should 1. identify examples of best cases within branding in the physical space, 2. interview one company expert from a best-case brand, 3. Uncover retail trends in general and understand what the drivers are changing the retail landscape, and 4. communicate and visualize their findings.



Figure 1. The three phases of project

They worked in small groups of two to three students. The outcome was 27 interviews with both international and national brands, big and small companies, companies within different industries.

All 27 brands had in common that they were doing an exceptional good job within branding in the physical space.

## The Tools & Methods

To help in the process, the students were introduced to three new tools, of which only one was known beforehand.

The tools were:

1. Trello, a project managing tool ([www.trello.com](http://www.trello.com))
2. Microsoft Teams, a then rather unknown Microsoft collaboration app built for hybrid teams ([www.teams.com](http://www.teams.com))
3. Mural, a digital visual collaboration platform ([www.mural.co](http://www.mural.co))

Microsoft Teams and Mural were indispensable in the process and were used both in combination as platforms for the teaching, group work, interviews, and coaching and guidance.

The methods used were:

1. The DART-analyses
2. Qualitative methods and interview techniques
3. Affinity diagramming
4. Mood boards

DART stands for Driver Analysis Reading Trends, and is a model developed by Maria Mackinney, Associate Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts' Design School in Copenhagen with a specialization in trends, and Lene Hald who teaches communication at KEA. The model is suitable for analyzing and describing trends, and therefore fit perfectly into the module where the students, among other things, had to uncover trends in retail<sup>2</sup>.

To ensure that everyone got around to the research questions asked, I developed a common question frame with some overall research questions, which the students were given the task of answering. They should then develop their own question frame. As long as they got to answer the overall research questions, it was ok to be flexible in how and what they asked their chosen best-in-class brand. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the students so I could afterwards dive deeper into the answers.

As way of organizing all the information from their interviews the students used the affinity diagramming. The method is a way

- 2 A full description of DART can be downloaded here: <https://archive.nordes.org/index.php/n13/article/view/109>

of clustering complex information with the scope of identifying patterns and highlights. The students were instructed to swap interviews after having transcribed them, read each other's findings, and then work in pairs of groups with the affinity diagramming discussing each other's findings.

All cases were presented written and visually using mood boards to describe and understand the brand experiences that were staged in the physical spaces.

## The Result of Phase One

The outcome of phase one was a knowledge product in form of a new model and guide describing how to use the physical space as a brand channel—The DEAL-model.

The DEAL-model consists of four phases: DEFINE, EXECUTE, ACTIVATE, AND LEARN as illustrated in figure 2 below.



Figure 2. DEAL-model

## The DEAL-model, a Short Presentation

Branding in the physical space is a process in constant development. The brand will change and develop under the influence of the context in which it appears and the people taking part. The process is therefore not linear, with a start and an end. Rather it is circular and continuous. In each phase, there are several interdependent focus points that need to be addressed before moving on to the next phase. Typically, you start with DEFINE, but if you have already defined your brand, your participants, the context, and the framework, you can jump right to the EXECUTE phase. Conversely, you may have to take a step back into the LEARN phase. The dotted arrow between

LEARN and DEFINE shows that decisions in the latter phase are dependent on the current state, expectations and insights into culture, identity, relations and ROE (return on investments). In the report “The Physical Space as a Brand Channel” the prevailing retail trends and the guide are described more thoroughly. The report can be downloaded here: <https://kea.dk/en/research-at-kea/future-for-physical-retail>.

## Phase Two—The Transference

Step two in the research project was knowledge transference. This phase is all about looping back knowledge to the industry and getting further feedback and insights. In autumn 2020, we launched a new teaching session for the Entrepreneurship & Design students in the third semester. It was a smaller class with only 25 students. This time we invited six retail brands in. They had in common that they were primarily digital brands but taking steps into being physical, and they were all curious about how to work with branding in the physical space. The six brands were Barons, Yoga Mood, CamCam Copenhagen, Lampemesteren, Son of a Tailor, and EDIE.

The session was built on the newly developed DEAL-model. First task was for the students to DEFINE the brands, their participants, the framework, and the contexts; and the next task was to propose specific EXECUTIONS of how to stage the brand in the physical space by integrating people, smart technology, rituals, and mood creators. The students should end up building physical 3D scale models of their executions and make suggestions for how to follow ACTIVATE and LEARN from the execution. During the five-week course it was only possible to actually get through the first two phases of the DEAL-model.

We planned the course in late autumn/winter 2020 with the expectation that COVID-19 at that time would be long gone history. It all started out very well, but on December 2nd, 2020, we had to reorganize to online teaching due to the spread of COVID-19. With the help of Teams we did, but in the phase of working with physical prototypes and with the outlook to doing the final presentations digitally, this was by no means ideal. The students were highly demotivated, but with the enthusiasm and engagement from our case-companies, they all succeeded in finalizing and presenting some great case works.

## The Learnings

### 1. Be prepared and coordinated

It requires great coordination and management. 80 students and 27 case companies that need attention is quite a challenge. The

students were invited to choose an interesting case company to work on themselves. It happened that many of them came back with the same brands, that they thought did a really good job and that they wanted to work on. To avoid that some companies were contacted by more groups of students, it was necessary to coordinate which brand they could work on before they started. As not to delay the process, all groups were initially asked to make a “wish-list” of three brand cases they would love to work on. I manually coordinated that they did not choose the same, and if their primary wish to case company was taken, they could work on the secondary and so forth.

### 2. Do not be shy—go for the top

The time was limited and from my previous experiences working with account management in advertising I know that getting through to the right person (decision maker) takes time. The students had only three days to research, choose a case company, and plan interviews. It was important that they did not waste time talking to people in the company not wanting to participate or not being able to find time or having the mandate to express the company’s strategy working with the brand in the physical space. The students were instructed to contact the top employees in the companies, that is CEO’s or CMO’s with the philosophy that it is better to be directed downwards, than waiting for permission upwards. It was a big challenge for many of the students to kind of “cold canvas” their project and “sell” the idea of getting involved to the brand, especially since they are used to us teachers making the appointments with the case companies.

### 3. Give back and give credits

When asking companies to be involved in the research, it was important for us to be able to give back. All companies involved in the interviews would get first-hand access to the innovation project and the “how-to-guide” that was the aim of the project. We invited the companies being interviewed to be part of the final knowledge product, with photos, quotes and mentions and not the least their inputs and comments. This was important for them, especially for the smaller and more unknown brands as a way of getting their names out. It was also important to us as a way of looping back our knowledge and get further input to the project.

### 4. Distance is no hinder

Given the new digital tools, it was possible to easily both research and work from a distance. Some of the students actually chose to interview brands physically placed far from them. Teams was a tool for being face-to-face with the interviewed and recording it at the same time. Mural made it possible to share and visualize

knowledge using good old sticky “post-it-notes” but in a virtual space, where you didn’t have to worry if your notes would still be hanging on the wall the day after.

## 5. Motivating through real-life cases

Working with real companies is highly motivating. Many of the students pointed out afterwards that they were highly motivated by the task of interviewing real professionals and in the final part when the physical presentation was changed to digital a great part of their motivation lay in the fact that they had a “real brand” expecting some real and highly creative and usable solutions.

## Now and the Future

We are now in the phase three of the innovation project—knowledge sharing—and this article is a part of it. The world is still VUCA. Since the arrival of the omicron variant we must all still be flexible and ready to adapt plans and projects. New tools have been introduced and what we have learned is that it is still possible to run research and innovation projects despite distance, and being creative in the virtual space is absolutely possible. But COVID-19 is still here. The new retail landscape is a reflection of the consumer’s demand for both shopping and experiences, but this is ever changing. Even though many are now craving real-life experiences, others might worry a lot and have

concerns about experiences in the physical space. There’s no doubt that smart technology will play an even greater role in the future of retail. But how? And why? This would be a great next research topic to explore.

## Notes

If anyone reading this paper would like to share knowledge or insights on the future of physical brand experiences or research, feel free to contact me anytime at [beor@kea.dk](mailto:beor@kea.dk).

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