

# Notes on a Pandemic

BY DEMETRE ELIOPOULOS



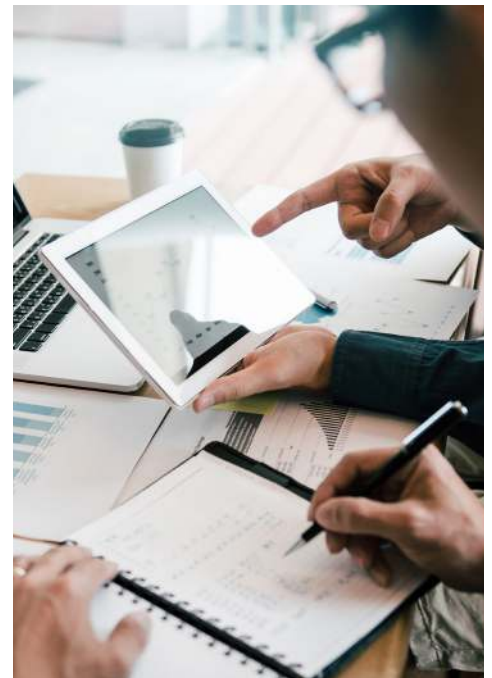
I've spent the better part of the last two decades in the market research/public opinion industry and on March 12, 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic came to Canada, one thing quickly became clear: **a lot of what we knew just went out the window.**

Our job at Angus Reid Group is to help our clients truly understand their audience (and the market at large) so that they can create an offering and communicate in a way that truly connects them to others. To do that, we spend all our time engaging with Canadians on their behaviours, perceptions, values, and outlooks on broader society.

No other event in the last hundred years (with perhaps the exception of the great wars) has disrupted the lives of Canadians and those around the world so completely. Canadians were no longer acting the same way, as their daily habits had altered, and the shadow of the pandemic encouraged everyone to re-evaluate their priorities.

Many of our clients came to us asking, "what do we do now?" Overnight, the information they obtained about their audience was out of date. Out of this question emerged the bi-weekly Angus Reid COVID-19 Monitor. The sole purpose of this monitor is to help Canadian businesses understand Canadians in this new environment and how they are changing as the situation evolves.

We are living in highly sensitive and unstable times. At a time when businesses need to bring their 'A' game due to all this economic uncertainty, those that are tone deaf to the current climate will encounter setbacks.



● “Overnight, the information they obtained about their audience was out of date.”

Here are **five things** to think about as you navigate the pandemic in 2021:

1.

## A life on hold

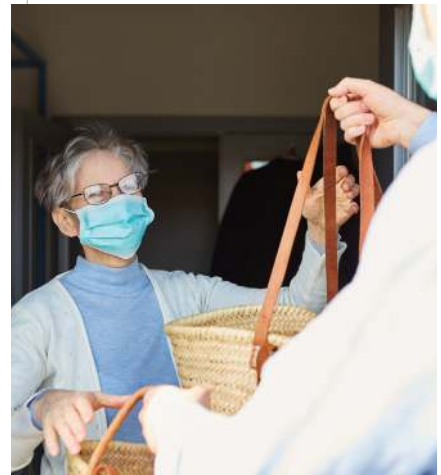
On the whole, Canadians are handling the pandemic well. In the face of a volatile environment where cases fluctuate, we've been stable in our stress levels, as most of us are doing our part in embracing preventative measures, and we are generally supporting our scientists and government leaders. This is a stark contrast to our neighbours to the south, who are very stressed and everything from masks to science to heeding medical direction is highly politicized and controversial.

However, things are not entirely alright with us. Beneath our stoic approach to this crisis is an emotional underbelly. Half of Canadians (52 per cent) classify their lives as "on hold" as opposed to "moving forward." We know a lot of this is related to lockdowns and the life disruptions that occur because of precautionary measures. But there are a whole host of reasons behind this general malaise.

Three-in-five Canadians consider precautions to be fatiguing and believe that the confidence in our collective ability to bring cases down is on the decline. Adding to this, almost one-half of our working force has been negatively impacted over the course of the year (either through layoffs, company closures, pay cuts, or shortening hours). Almost one-in-three say their personal finances worsened as a result of the pandemic. One-in-five describe their mental health as "poor" or "very poor." From mental well-being to financial well-being, there's a wide variety of ways that Canadians have felt the effects of the pandemic.

• 52%

Canadians classify their lives as "on hold" as opposed to "moving forward"



## 2. Handle with care

With the personal toll in mind, Canadian companies are asking themselves if they should be reaching out or whether they should stay silent for the time being. The short answer is: this isn't business as usual, but you can still do business. Reach out to your customers and just be aware of the variety of situations they may find themselves in. Four-in-five Canadians say that "it's reassuring to hear from Canadian companies at this time." They also want engagement. A similar proportion say that "Canadian companies that take an active role during this crisis will have gained a loyal customer in me." In fact, one-half say, "Canadian companies that do nothing during this crisis will lose a customer in me."

The trick is to find the right way to do it. A great deal of research in the communications space this year yields a few answers. For starters, as long as you've addressed your efforts related to the crisis at some point, then you can continue to communicate about products and services. Secondly, context matters. A beer commercial showing a fun night at the club may have rated highly at some point, but now it comes across as being tone deaf, or even worse, irrelevant to our lives. Thirdly, now more than ever, we're looking for content that moves us emotionally. We're looking to break free of the monotonous day-to-day and feel something that's real.

## 3. My home is my castle

With nowhere to go and limited ability to have visitors, Canadians turned their attention to their homes. They cooked at home and tried more recipes than usual. Restaurant outings were replaced with take-out nights



• 4 in 5

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in the kitchen. Social outings were replaced with “Zoom dates.” As a result of all this time at home, Canadians began investing in their home environment. Home renovations and decorating projects became the norm across the country. So, while Canadians are itching to get out again, they’ve also spent the last year making a better nest.

Case in point – over the last year almost one-half of Canada’s workforce started working from home. These individuals report high levels of satisfaction with the experience (specifically with their overall work productivity and their ability to maintain that coveted work/life balance). In fact, only one-in-five indicate that they want to go back to the office full time, and two-in-five say they don’t want to go back to the office at all. Aside from COVID-19 concerns, they are less eager to return so that they don’t have to commute, will have fewer expenses as a result of being at home, and have a better lifestyle. Employers may have a difficult time coaxing their employees back to the office.

## 4. Online shopping is here to stay

Retailers and grocers who think that online services are a pandemic-only situation better think again. Before March, curbside pick-up or online delivery was a niche offering among grocers and relatively non-existent among retailers. Now, almost half of Canadians have tried online grocery services and that proportion increases to three-quarters for retailer services. And while there were definitely some kinks in the process early on (and some companies that continue to have problems incorporating the new system), generally speaking, Canadians are quite happy with the services they receive. Naturally, online-only retailers like Amazon.ca get the highest ratings, but the rest are not too far behind.

● “Almost half of Canadians have tried online grocery services.”



What does this spell for the future? Many Canadians are yearning for more in-store experiences these days, but they still want the best of both worlds. About one-quarter of Canadians say that they'll continue to use online grocery services from time to time after the pandemic. This proportion increases to almost one-half among large retailers in Canada.

## What does “back to normal” even mean?

Getting back to normal has been on our minds since the pandemic started. But when will it happen? We don't yet know the exact timing, but according to most Canadians, we'll be spending the bulk of 2021 getting there. Few people think that back to normal means things will go back to the way it was before. In fact, half think that there will be some major permanent changes. But what will they be?

We've already described how working from home and online services are here to stay, but Canadians report a few more things as well: more urgency for having financial nest-eggs for occasions like these, fewer handshakes, more video calls for business reasons and less business travel, and fewer outings where there are large masses (like concerts and bars).

For now, Canadians are still fixated on “back to normal” and all companies have a role to play in getting us there.●



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**QUESTIONS THAT MATTER.  
ANSWERS THAT COUNT.**

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