

# Zipline

## **Retail Responds to Omicron and Beyond**

How Retailers Can Use Advanced  
Communications Tools to Stay  
Ahead of the Curve Now and in  
the Years to Come



COVID-19 required retailers to adopt new communications tactics in tight time frames. The imperative to protect employees and customers left no other choice. Two years later, the Omicron variant of the virus presents a fresh wave of store communications challenges.

How should retailers respond to the latest twists and turns of the pandemic? This ebook from Zipline, developers of market-leading retail communications solutions, reflects on the retail response to the pandemic and recommends best practices for improving store communications today and staying ahead of the curve in the years to come.



## Part 1: Lessons of the First Wave

It all changed in a few days in March 2020. Retailers with essential employees stayed open but reconfigured their stores to slow the spread of COVID-19. Non-essential workers went on furlough.

“I’m not sure any of us knew what we were getting into,” recalls Jeremy Baker, chief technology officer and co-founder of Zipline, which specializes in cloud-based retail communication applications. “We all were crossing our fingers that in a couple weeks, we’d be back to normal.”

It didn’t happen. People who sold groceries and clothing for a living were thrust to the front lines of a public health emergency. Retailers put up plastic barriers, pasted arrows on the aisles and enforced masking mandates. Employees learned how to keep their stores clean and reduce infection risks.

Through it all, a common thread emerged: Retailers needed better ways to communicate with their people. The messaging had to be timely, accurate, consistent and thorough. And it had to be delivered to people when they needed it.

**“It was extremely important to be able to communicate to groupings of stores or locations on a city, county or state basis,” adds Corbin Eilander, Zipline’s director of client success. “It was really challenging for them to navigate all of the changes each and every day — some of them every couple of minutes or every few hours.”**

Leaders of retail chains wanted to reach every single employee, every single time. They needed effective processes to make that happen.

## Part 2: Emerging Best Practices for COVID Communications

From the opening days of the pandemic, frontline retailers dived into video to send messages of reassurance and guidance to their people.

“Many of our brands are really focused on how they communicate to all employees — not just about COVID but also leadership updates and brand awareness.” Eilander says.

“How do they engage with them from a corporate philosophy standpoint? How do they engage with them in training?” Without in-person instruction, video became the go-to medium.

Meanwhile, some stores became de facto distribution centers that delivered products to customers in parking lots. New procedures required new on-boarding processes. The question in every retail leader's mind persisted: How do they deliver all of that to their teams in a way that's easy to understand?

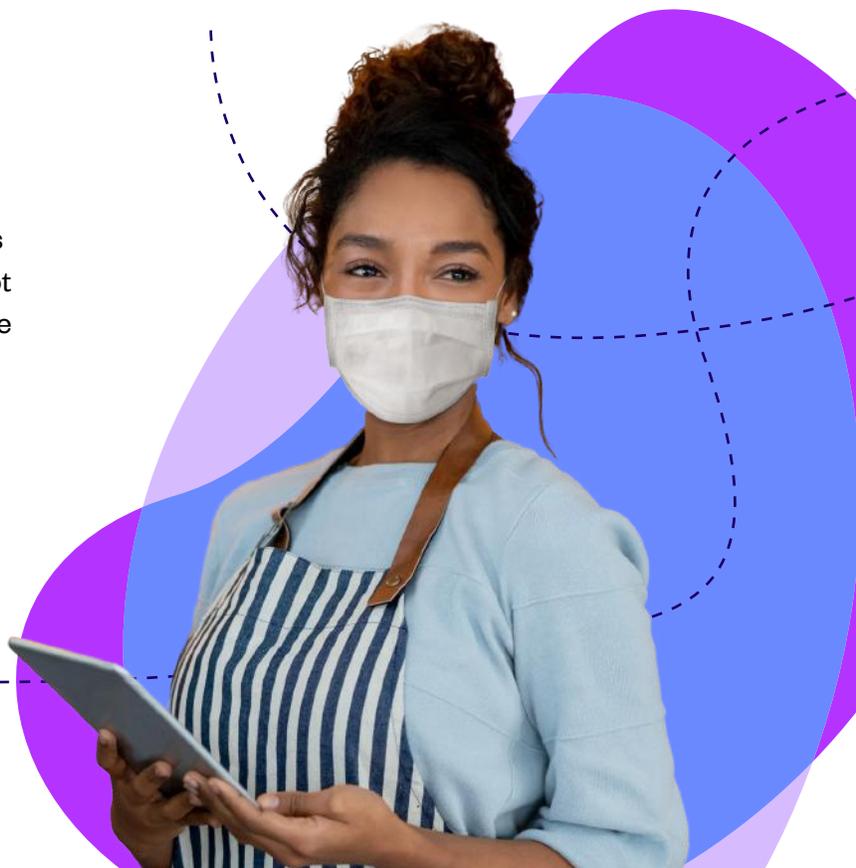
Today's retail leaders increasingly work with remote teams, using video to explain policies and processes. And store leaders are using on-site video to communicate back to the company headquarters.

Eilander notes that one of the biggest challenges is creating a central hub for information sharing. “A lot of our customers are looking at ways to consolidate things in a one-stop shop, so all of their employees are working off either the same information or the same experience of getting that information.”

### The logical solution to these challenges is a mobile app that:

- Creates a single source of truth for retailers, delivering consistent, credible and caring messaging to every employee.
- Encourages innovation and agility, freeing workers to focus on their strategic goals.
- Keeps employees engaged, reducing churn and enhancing retention.
- Improves health and safety compliance, reducing the risks of harm and financial liability.

This mobile messaging hub gives retailers the tools to communicate quickly and effectively every day of the year — and have everything they need when new crises come along.



## Part 3: Using Technology to Adapt in Omicron's Wake



Retail leaders pivoted time and again as Covid's opening wave gave way to the Delta and Omicron variants. Omicron went national with blazing speed, leading to quarantines that forced millions to stay home throughout the U.S. workforce.

Supply chain interruptions and empty shelves provided echoes of the pandemic's early days. To keep up, stores are learning to communicate more things to more people in more channels, from video and texts and to emails and social media posts.

With everything changing from one day to the next, the need for effective communication tools has never been more pressing.

“For retailers, the biggest thing is making sure that they're showing the right message in the right place at the right time,” Baker says. “With all that's coming down, some things still have to happen every day — critical product pullbacks, legal adjustments, POS errors — either in individual stores, in regions or across the entire fleet.”

Slipups that risk legal action can't be explained away with “I missed the memo” anymore. There's no substitute for using messaging tools to protect employees and customers.

Communications must be targeted and specific, Baker adds. If Chicago stores face new safety rules, they shouldn't get the same messaging delivered to the stores in Dallas. Communicators also have to prioritize messaging, ensuring that low-priority messages don't blot out their more important peers.

Baker cautions against assuming technology can solve everything. “This is fundamentally a human problem, making sure people can work together effectively to get things done,” he says. “But the more technology helps bridge gaps and surface information, the easier it is for people to work together and or for the whole organization to get things done successfully.”

## Ensuring a Robust Response in the Future

With the pandemic at two years and counting, many retailers have a tangle of communication tools, processes and policies. How can they transition to streamlined store communication in the centralized hub described above?

**“It's not necessarily a problem if there's a lot of tools,”** Baker says. **“The problem is knowing where to start with those tools.”**

The critical first step might be a centralized communication dashboard that forms a bridge to other retail applications for functions like inventory control. Alerts or notifications in the inventory control app, for instance, could be routed to the hub dashboard and then distributed to the people who need the information.

Apps for chatting or newsletter publishing also could be linked to the communication hub. From there, employees can search for critical information across multiple apps. Baker adds that working with a cloud-native, software-as-a-service app for store communications is the most flexible option when companies must move fast.



Of course, retailers cannot neglect the interpersonal side of store communications. Leaders must be open and transparent about the need to adopt new technologies and processes. Task management is critical.

**“Everybody in the organization, including the field employees must know what needs to be done — how to get it done and get it done consistently,”** Baker advises.

Finally, companies need strong partners: technology developers and system integrators who take the time to understand their unique challenges.

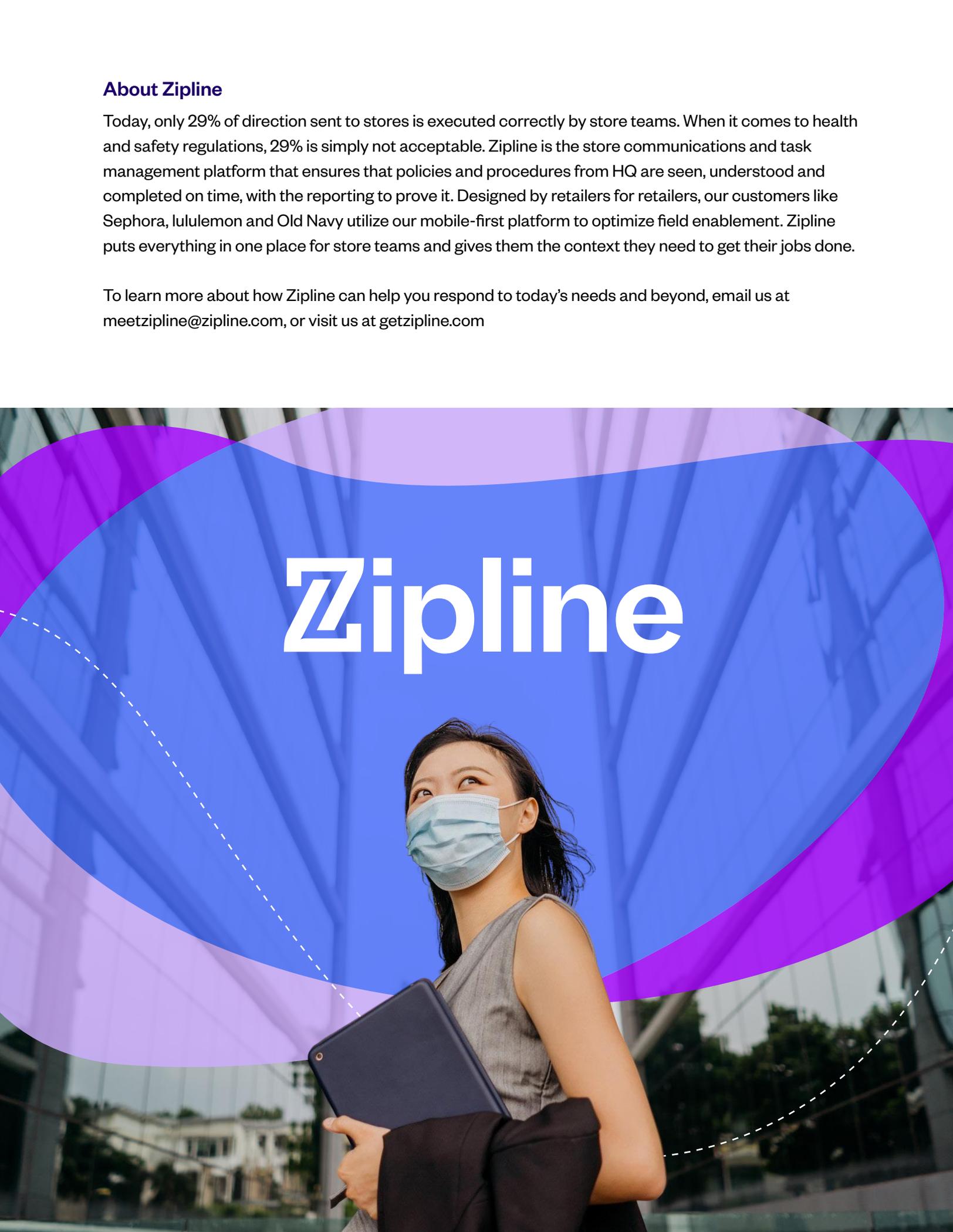
## With the Right Tools, Retail Can Reinvent Itself Every Day

There's no going back to normal. After COVID-19 is vanquished (or, at least, controlled), retailers will face disruptive competitors and fickle consumer tastes. Advanced store-communications technology can keep retailers connected with their frontline employees while implementing an effective, flexible strategy for adapting to ever-changing marketplace environments.

## About Zipline

Today, only 29% of direction sent to stores is executed correctly by store teams. When it comes to health and safety regulations, 29% is simply not acceptable. Zipline is the store communications and task management platform that ensures that policies and procedures from HQ are seen, understood and completed on time, with the reporting to prove it. Designed by retailers for retailers, our customers like Sephora, lululemon and Old Navy utilize our mobile-first platform to optimize field enablement. Zipline puts everything in one place for store teams and gives them the context they need to get their jobs done.

To learn more about how Zipline can help you respond to today's needs and beyond, email us at [meetzipline@zipline.com](mailto:meetzipline@zipline.com), or visit us at [getzipline.com](http://getzipline.com)



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