Military Consumers React to Life During Pandemic



NEX Pearl Harbor launched its Quarantine Support Program by taking orders and delivering goods to military members on restriction of movement orders and quarantined in rooms on Joint Reserve Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii. U.S. Navy/NEXCOM Public Affairs

The COVID-19 crisis has cut back on time spent shopping for food and necessities, changing some military and dependent shopping habits and causing sales of some items — both essential and nonessential — to jump.

Kristine Sturkie, a spokesperson for the Navy Exchange Service Command, said the U.S. Navy Exchanges haven't seen a rush to stockpile items, although there are limits on some essential items such as toilet paper, hand sanitizers and some cleaning

products, so that more customers have access to these needed products. Sturkie said the stores have seen an increase in sales of personal items such as hair clippers.

NEX associates are accepting requests and delivering orders to military patrons who are in a restricted movement status or confined to quarters while under quarantine.

Since fewer people are commuting to work or venturing out, gasoline sales are down, as they are for civilians. Sturkie said the number of gallons sold at Navy Exchange gas stations was down about 21% worldwide compared to last year, and although the data is not available yet for April, she expects gallon purchases to be down for the month as well.

“Laptop and home office supply sales have spiked with more people teleworking, along with light fitness equipment to support home workouts,” Sturkie said. “Sales of outdoor items like bubbles, sidewalk chalk, basketballs and footballs and games, coloring books and playing cards are trending with the kids spending more time at home as well as home-organization and home-improvement type products.”

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Even though people are at home, many are conducting business in Zoom and other online platform meetings, where they must look presentable. As salons are closed, the health-and-beauty aids industry is seeing a sharp increase in the sale of do-it-yourself hair coloring products.

While online shopping has been strong, many more consumers are resorting to the web as a last resort. Online retailers like Amazon have seen dramatic increases in sales of both food and

non-food items. While the nation is seeing huge unemployment numbers, parcel delivery companies like UPS and FedEx are hiring.

John Blythe, the Defense Commissary Activity Fort Belvoir store director, said there are no food shortages, but the commissary is having some challenges in replenishing merchandise from manufacturers during the novel coronavirus crisis.

The commissary stores sell military Meals-Ready-to-Eat (MRE) year-round and for camping, hunting and for use in the event of adverse weather like blizzards or hurricanes. With the COVID-19 crisis, Blythe said some customers are worried and purchasing MREs at a higher rate than normal. Large pallets of MREs by the case are on display immediately as you enter the Fort Belvoir Commissary.



NEX Bahrain Distribution Center associates prepare NEX

Quarantine Support Program orders for a portside delivery to a ship in port at Naval Support Activity Bahrain. U.S. Navy/NEXCOM Public Affairs

“In speaking with customers, many are concerned with food shortages and purchasing them for home use or shipping them to family members who are serving overseas,” Blythe said. “MRE sales usually peak in the summer months but we have never had such a demand for them as we had in the past 30 to 45 days.”

Hugo Ostreng of the Norwegian company DryTech, which makes Arctic rations for NATO forces, camping and backpacking as well as survival meals, said his company has seen an increase in the number of orders from both civilian as well as military customers. DryTech is a manufacturer of freeze-dried meals and as well an assembler of food rations for field applications for the military and outdoor markets.

“DryTech saw a sudden increase in the sale of freeze-dried meals for the civilian market,” said Jan Trondsen, key account manager for military sales.

“Many households thought it was a good idea to build up a little more food on stock in their own houses. We also had an increase in the orders to units and institutions because the system of distributing food from buffets and serving lines in not currently permitted. Our products proved very useful as they can be prepared, distributed and consumed without a kitchen or food-service personnel.”

Jessica Davis of Patagonia Provisions said sales of the company’s shelf-stable food products have seen a large spike. Backpacking food is usually expensive, but Davis said people are willing to pay a premium for lightweight, healthy, easy-to-prepare meals that are nutritious and taste good, especially after a long day of outdoor activities.

“Our customer base is expanding due to COVID-19 with folks filling their pantries in preparation for what’s ahead. But our existing customers are also coming back and placing

larger-than-normal orders. Our supply chain and distribution system are healthy and equipped to handle the increased demand," Davis said.

"We've been selling a lot of selling a lot of buffalo jerky, soups and chilis, seafood and the gift boxes. High-protein freeze-dried meals last a long time and you can live off them, so people are stocking the pantry. Patagonia Provisions is certainly feeling those effects."