

■ Unsure if e-com firms can sell non-essential goods

# Confusion among retail players over guidelines

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The Ministry of Home Affairs' lockdown 2.0 guidelines that allowed resuming e-commerce operations have created much confusion among the online players, modern retailers and unorganised traders.

Interpreting different clauses of the guidelines, e-commerce companies are gearing up to sell mobile phones, laptops, garments and similar items from April 20, but the unorganised retailers believe the guidelines still do not allow online sales of non-essentials.

The clause 14 (5,6) of the guidelines states that e-commerce companies will be allowed to operate from April 20. Vehicles used by e-commerce operators will

be allowed to ply with necessary permissions and courier services also will be permitted. However, it does not specify whether this includes only essential items or includes non-essential goods as well.

Some of the e-commerce companies found this as a permission to sell non-essential goods as well. Industry sources said they have received verbal permission from the MHA to sell non-essentials.

"In accordance with the MHA guidelines issued on 15th April 2020, we are preparing to scale up operations to meet the requirements of our users—both buyers and sellers. Summer apparel, kitchen accessories, small appliances like headsets, tablets for school work, home printers, competitive exam

books etc will be in high demand," said Snapdeal in a statement.

Flipkart too issued a statement on similar lines. "We are working with lakhs of sellers, small businesses and artisans across India and helping them prepare their business and workforce to make products available for consumers in this time of need," the company said.

"We are working closely with all our partners—brands, manufacturers, sellers, small businesses and local shops—helping them to offer the most needed products to customers," said Amazon.

Meanwhile the Retailers Association of India, which represents modern retailers, urged the government to strongly consider allowing all forms of home

delivery across retailers.

However, the Confederation of All India Traders (Cait) says Clause 13 (1) of the MHA guidelines clearly states e-comm companies can conduct online delivery of essential items only.

The 13 (1) says that "all facilities in the supply chain of essential goods, whether involved in manufacturing, wholesale or retail of such goods through local stores, large brick and mortar stores or e-commerce companies should be allowed to operate, ensuring strict social distancing without any restriction on their timing of opening or closure".

"The MHA guidelines do not allow e-commerce companies to sell non-essential goods. This is a misinterpretation," said Praveen Khandewal of Cait.