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Crayola: Environmental Disruptions affecting its Back-to-School Strategy[[1]](#endnote-1)

Sheri Lambert and Sara Honovich wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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In May 2020, senior vice president of marketing Forest Green at Crayola LLC (Crayola) in Easton, Pennsylvania, United States, was considering the company’s back to school strategy for the fall. By May 2020, Green and his marketing team would have been quite aware that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic meant a major market disruption, and that Crayola had no choice but to face it. With students working from home, a new back-to-school plan was needed immediately for Crayola to be able to reach its critical revenue targets for this prime selling season. The marketing team faced a June deadline for the new back-to-school plan.

At the start of 2020, Crayola was looking forward to an exciting year ahead, based on the company’s announcement of a major promotional campaign named Colors of the World in support of its new line of crayon colours, which represented a breadth of new skin tones.[[2]](#endnote-2) This initiative fit well with the heightened emphasis on diversity and inclusion across the country.[[3]](#endnote-3) In addition, Crayola introduced multiple new feature products and package sizes. Both initiatives were expected to produce significant revenue for the upcoming year. However, with major changes in the marketplace due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, business had recently become more complicated. Like everyone else, Crayola realized that students were unlikely to attend school in person in the fall. As Rod Sides, vice-chairman and US leader of retail, wholesale and distribution at Deloitte LLP, stated in a July 2020 press release,

The back-to-school shopping season traditionally represents a clear transition to fall, but families this year face a period of uncertainty. With school formats still up in the air for many, the spend is shifting to tech as parents anticipate the possibility of remote learning and the need to supplement students’ education. Retailers that can stay nimble and react quickly to changing needs for education amid the challenges of COVID-19, will likely be the ones that will have an opportunity to appeal shoppers this season.[[4]](#endnote-4)

By late spring, it was clear that Crayola, like many other companies, would have to develop an alternative strategy for the rest of 2020. Other than Christmas, the back-to-school season was Crayola’s strongest time of the year for business. This year in particular, Crayola would have to ensure it had the right tools to meet the targets established earlier in the year. Fortunately, the company’s marketing and leadership teams had learned years earlier to adapt or be left behind. Crayola had to embrace technology and review its omnichannel options to form strong partnerships with retailers and suppliers.[[5]](#endnote-5) It also needed a diverse assortment of products and services for its evolving customer segments. The company needed a strong plan for its back-to-school marketing strategy, but what that plan looked like was not clear.

CRAYOLA: A COLOuRFUL BEGINNINg

In 1885, cousins Edwin Binney and C. Harold Smith took over the pigment business that Binney’s father had been operating and started a new company, Crayola LLC.[[6]](#endnote-6) In 1903, the new company produced its first box of eight wax crayons and embarked on a mission to inspire artistic creativity in children. Over time, Crayola developed its portfolio of innovative art tools, crafting activities, and creative toys.[[7]](#endnote-7)

In 1984, Crayola became a wholly-owned subsidiary of Hallmark Cards Inc. and began playing a significant role in the personal development strategies of consumers. Crayola became one of the largest “activity” toy brands in the United States. In 2017, it was awarded the Activity Toy of the Year for its Crayola Air Marker Sprayer by The Toy Association Inc..[[8]](#endnote-8)

As part of its brand portfolio, the company opened five family attractions called Crayola Experience throughout the United States, each Crayola-inspired. At each location, families could express their creativity and experience colour with hands-on activities inspired by Crayola products and technologies.

Crayola embraced its digital future with parents and educators alike from as early as 2012, as confirmed by Vicky Lozano, the company’s vice-president of corporate strategy: “We’re medium agnostic. We never had a debate about whether we should or shouldn’t step into digital. It’s all about how kids play. . . . We happen to make a lot of great tools, but at the end of the day, we’re here to help parents and teachers raise creative and inspired kids.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

One key strength of Crayola was its long-term focus and belief “in unleashing the originality in every child.”[[10]](#endnote-10) Connecting its products to its customers emotionally and physically became Crayola’s brand essence (see Exhibit 1).

INDUSTRY BACKGROUND

Crayola competed in an industry that manufactured supplies for offices, schools, and art (excluding paper products).[[11]](#endnote-11) The list of products most commonly sold in this industry included pens, pencils, markers, crayons, chalk, modelling clay, and staplers.[[12]](#endnote-12) Major US companies in this industry—and therefore competing against Crayola—included ACCO Brands Corporation, AT Cross Company LLC, Dixon Ticonderoga Company, Pentel Co. Ltd., and Sargent Art. However, Crayola was the only brand among its competition with a strong presence across the full range of retail channels across the industry. For example, the company played a major role in the market sector for childhood development and artistic creativity. Its strong brand presence had continued to grow over time to command an emotional connection with consumers.

Crayola was considered an iconic US brand by many consumers. It locally manufactured 80–90 per cent of the world’s crayons and many of its other products, including markers, paints, modelling compounds, and Silly Putty-branded eggs. The company’s manufacturing facilities were located in the same area as the company’s headquarters, in Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania.[[13]](#endnote-13)

BACK-TO-SCHOOL SEASON

The back-to-school season, when children and teachers resumed their schoolyear routine, was a key peak time for Crayola. Retailers—traditional and online alike⎯expected Crayola products to play an important role for them, both in their store displays and across their full range of merchandise. Typically, the back-to-school season in stores could begin as early as late June or early July and extend into mid-September. Many schools provided back-to-school shopping lists for the convenience of students and their parents (see Exhibit 2).

However, in 2020, uncertainty about what the impending school year would look like caused many parents to revise their annual purchasing behaviour. According to a Deloitte survey, 40 per cent of parents planned to buy fewer traditional back-to-school supplies in the fall of 2020.[[14]](#endnote-14) As well, online spending for school supplies was anticipated to increase dramatically to reach almost as high as traditional store sales levels.[[15]](#endnote-15)

A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a public health emergency of international concern.[[16]](#endnote-16) The first case of the novel coronavirus was found in Wuhan City, in China’s Hubei Province, but soon spread rapidly throughout the globe.[[17]](#endnote-17) By early March, COVID-19 had spread to most countries, with cases of illness and deaths rising rapidly. Schools and businesses experienced widespread shutdowns. The pandemic had an immediate and profound impact onlife in general, with implications for business; the economy; and people’s physical, emotional, and psychological well-being.

The pandemic caused many businesses to either shut down completely or adapt their strategies to the new environment. Marketers faced a wide number of challenges amid the pandemic, which resulted in mandated quarantines, work-from-home orders, social distancing requirements, and closure of nonessential businesses and schools. It was more critical than ever for companies to revise their operation strategies and marketing plans to find the best way to maintain customer engagement during the pandemic.

ARTS and CRAFTS INDUSTRY: CHALLENGES DUE TO COVID-19

The five Crayola Experience locations were temporarily shut down for two weeks starting March 13, 2020. Emphasizing the health and safety of its team members and guests as its top priority, Crayola took extra precautions in response to the rapidly-evolving COVID-19 situation.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Crayola was not alone. Retailers expected fast-paced shifts in shopping behaviour to continue. In response, retailers continued to innovate in ways that were likely to outlast the pandemic. Even though many stores were closed and people were not shopping at traditional retail outlets, certain types of product categories were in high demand, including hand sanitizers, cleaning products, and paper goods. With so many people staying home due to closures of schools, offices, and stores, demand grew exponentially for home-based activities. [[19]](#endnote-19)

For example, traditional toy manufacturers saw considerable growth in sales for activity-based toys after lockdowns became effective in March 2020, as the chief executive officer of MGA Entertainment Inc. realized: “Toys that keep kids busy for a long time, or at least 45 minutes, while parents are working at home are what’s soaring.”[[20]](#endnote-20)

On April 20, 2020, market research company NPD Group Inc. reported that consumers—specifically parents—had prepared for their families’ survival over an extended period by stocking up on basic home necessities, but with closures of schools and workplaces continuing, phase two of the big scramble began.[[21]](#endnote-21) Parents throughout the country began purchasing large amounts of art supplies, crafts, and games to keep their children entertained and busy while staying home (see Exhibit 3). Parents looked for ways to help their children navigate new home-schooling situations. They searched for sources of entertainment for the whole family, knowing they would spend more time together at home.[[22]](#endnote-22)

An industry analysis by digital marketing agency NMPi found that the increase in demand for arts and crafts activities was associated with ways to cope, communicate, and connect. This put pressure on Crayola to fill the funnel with new products and craft ideas that could help make people’s lives better during this difficult time.[[23]](#endnote-23)

In the quarter ending August 2020, while many retailers were struggling with the “new normal,” the largest arts and crafts business in the United States, The Michaels Companies, Inc. (Michaels), saw its net sales increase by over 11 per cent, both online and in its traditional stores, with comparable store sales increasing by 12 per cent. This phenomenon reinforced the demand that was soaring during the pandemic, as people craved at-home opportunities for fun and self-expression activities.[[24]](#endnote-24)

NAVIGATING THE 2020–21 SCHOOL YEAR

In August 2020, consumer research firm Suzy Inc., in collaboration with Crayola, conducted a market study asking parents of school-aged children nationwide how they would manage the new 2020–21 school year during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the respondents, 30 per cent reported that they had a standard list of items they purchased each year for back-to-school shopping. However, with the evolving status of school closures and COVID-related restrictions, 44 per cent of parents were delaying purchases as of mid-August 2020, waiting to hear from schools and teachers about specific school supplies that would be needed for this unique school year.[[25]](#endnote-25)

The study detailed a shift in the purchasing of physical supplies. Parents who typically bought lunch boxes (38 per cent) reported that they would not purchase new ones for the 2020–21 school year. Parents, however, anticipated that they would continue to buy supplies necessary for completing homework, such as pens and pencils (72 per cent), markers and crayons (68 per cent), and notebooks and paper (68 per cent).[[26]](#endnote-26)

Rick Stringer, the vice-president of Crayola’s customer leadership centre, made the following comments based on the findings:

After learning that parents are counting on brands like ours to keep a sense of normalcy as they navigate these uncharted territories, Crayola will be shifting the way that we approach our in-store shopper strategy to support them. At Crayola, our purpose is to help parents and educators raise creative kids, and we will continue to provide resources and products that inspire students during the 2020−2021 school year.[[27]](#endnote-27)

OMNICHANNEL Model: JUST THE RIGHT TIME

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, key retailers were driving the growth of Crayola’s business. Some of these retailers were running efficient omnichannel operations; others were not. Mass merchandisers were among the strongest operators of omnichannel strategies at the time. Consumers were accustomed to the websites of these mass merchandisers and were comfortable shopping on their online platforms. These retailers had digital applications that were being used regularly by their customers and offered store pick-up or shipping, often for free.[[28]](#endnote-28) One major benefit for consumers was that they could purchase a huge range of products at once, from necessities such as groceries, health care products, and paper goods to unrelated products such as toys, seasonal merchandise, school supplies, and arts and crafts, including crayons.[[29]](#endnote-29) Crayola would most likely benefit from partnerships and digital promotions with US giants such as mass merchandise retailer Target Corporation (Target); hobby, arts, and crafts supply retailer Michaels; and grocery retailer The Kroger Company (Kroger).

CLICK-AND-COLLECT Shopping ON THE UPTICK

As retailers enhanced their online store displays to connect with customers, they also recognized that many buyers preferred the immediacy of picking up their purchases quickly, rather than waiting for delivery. This realization led to the popularity of so-called “click-and-collect” services such as buy online/pick up at curbside (BOPAC) and buy online/pick up in-store (BOPIS) during the pandemic.[[30]](#endnote-30)

These services drastically reduced the time that customers spent in-store but allowed merchants to continue operations, even when their delivery networks and fulfillment centres were strained. According to Adobe Inc.’s Digital Economy Index, the number of BOPIS orders maintained a year-over-year growth of 195 per cent in May 2020 and grew by 130 per cent year-over-year in June 2020. This growth was seen even after a strong upward trend had occurred in mid-March and April 2020, when stay-at-home orders were first communicated.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Adobe Inc.’s survey of 1,000 consumers, conducted in parallel with the Digital Economic Index analysis, found that 23 per cent of online shoppers preferred buying online and picking up their items in-store or curbside, rather than waiting for delivery at home. Mass merchants such as Walmart Inc. and Target, as well as some grocery chains including Kroger and Publix Super Markets Inc., had started offering BOPAC and BOPIS services even before the onset of the pandemic.[[32]](#endnote-32)

This initiative, referred to by some as “omnishopping,” allowed consumers to buy and receive products whenever and wherever they wanted. Omnichannel shoppers used a variety of devices, platforms, and channels to browse and buy products. They expected to have a connected and consistent experience across all channels of the retailer (see Exhibit 4).

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT WITH COLLABORATORS

Crayola began using social media networks such as Facebook to drive sales from retailers and from its own online store. On Facebook, the company posted products, ideas, and activities for both parents and kids to learn about and click through to a retail site to make a purchase online, unless the consumer preferred to visit a traditional store to learn more about the product or activity. Crayola was able to use social media to generate awareness for alternative uses of products and ideas to enhance brand loyalty and generate more sales. In Crayola’s social media posts, Michaels stores were tagged to seamlessly allow users to make a purchase at online Michaels stores and choose delivery, BOPIS, or BOPAC.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Crayola regularly posted its own do-it-yourself project videos on Facebook to create consumer engagement and generate sales. Social media posts provided the company with omnichannel marketing and sales opportunities. The company posted a steady stream of new ideas and provided effective opportunities for customers to buy and use Crayola products. Users could click through from Facebook to Crayola’s website to purchase products online or choose instead to compare prices online and then shop in physical stores. Regardless, the omnichannel strategy allowed Crayola to create strong value for consumers and to strengthen its brand.[[34]](#endnote-34)

The omnichannel model was becoming very popular among retailers and consumers. It provided a seamless journey from idea to purchase, including the opportunity for learning about products, comparing cost, purchase convenience, assistance with products, efficient ordering, and flexible product pick-up options.[[35]](#endnote-35) The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic may have stimulated omnichannel retail due to necessity, but it seemed likely it was there to stay*.* Businesses were adopting omnichannel strategies as fast as they could, and Crayola was doing its best to keep up with the trend. In addition to offering consumers ease and convenience for product order, purchase, and pick-up, Crayola had also been working closely with Kroger to bundle products into kits.[[36]](#endnote-36)

In 2019, Crayola was a prominent brand in Michaels stores. As well, Crayola was working together with Target and Kroger to drive sales through omnichannel strategies, including co-marketing on social media and bundling products together into kits.[[37]](#endnote-37) Together, Crayola (the manufacturer) and Michaels or Target (the retailers) generated new revenue sources through consumer awareness, purchase, and experience. Although Michaels stores provided mainly arts and crafts products, Target and many other mass retailers sold a much wider breadth of products.

The situation at Michaels stores was a good example of the change that was occurring in the general retail environment during the pandemic. Despite signs of lower rates of COVID-19 infections as the quarter ended, Michaels was in the process of introducing new omnichannel capabilities including curbside pick-up, same-day delivery, expanded shipping services from stores, BOPIS, and purchases using the Crayon mobile application. These initiatives had helped drive e-commerce growth for Crayola in the first quarter of 2020, despite a major gap in store sales.[[38]](#endnote-38) Michaels was planning further multichannel activities, but as of May 2020, fewer than 500 of the retailer’s 1,273 stores had reopened since shutting down in March 2020. Financial results showed improvement in the second and third quarters of 2020, as stores began to reopen and consumers used physical stores as an integral omnichannel component for the smoothest shopping experience possible.[[39]](#endnote-39)

A COLOuRFUL FUTURE?

Crayola executives would need to tackle the challenges that accompanied the “new normal” after the pandemic. Would the methods that they had used to preserve Crayola’s culture during the company’s first 100 years be sufficient as the company embarked on new ways of communicating with consumers? With the 2020 back-to-school season quickly approaching, Crayola needed to have a plan in place. But what would be the best strategy? What tactics should be employed to ensure a positive momentum? How could Crayola continue to be relevant to both consumers and retailers?

EXHIBIT 1: CRAYOLA’S BRAND ESSENCE

|  |
| --- |
| *We believe in unleashing the originality in every child. Free the what if? What would a kid do? Give colorful wings to invisible things.* |

Source: “Brand Essence,” Crayola, accessed November 7, 2020, www.crayola.com/about-us/company/brand-essence.

EXHIBIT 2: BACK-TO-SCHOOL SUPPLY LIST (ELEMENTARY SCHOOL EXAMPLE)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ScissorsBackpackPalettePaint brush   |  |  | | --- | --- | | **Qty.** | **Supply** | | 1 | 12 ct. Crayola Coloured Pencils | | 2 | Crayola Washable Thin Markers | | 2 | Crayola Washable Thick Markers | | 1 pkg. | 6 ct. Expo Markers Thin Black | | 1 pkg. | Expo Markers | | 2 | 24 ct. Crayola Crayons | | 24 | #2 Pre-Sharpened Pencils | | 1 | Fiskar Scissors | | 2 | 12ct. Elmer’s Small Glue Sticks (White or Clear) | | 2 | Plastic Pocket Folder (1 Red and 1 Blue) | | 2 | 8 ct. Crayola Washable Watercolour Sets | | 2 | Kleenex Brand Tissues—Large Box | | 2 | Hand Sanitizer with Pump (12 oz.) | | 1 | Unscented Hand Wipes (for Art) | |

Note: Qty. = quantity; ct. = count; pkg. = package; oz. = ounce

Source: Created by the authors.

EXHIBIT 3: EARLY PANDEMIC GROWTH, WEEK ENDING MARCH 21, 2020

**ARTS &**

**CRAFTS**

**COLOURING & ART**

**86%**

**70%**

**146%**

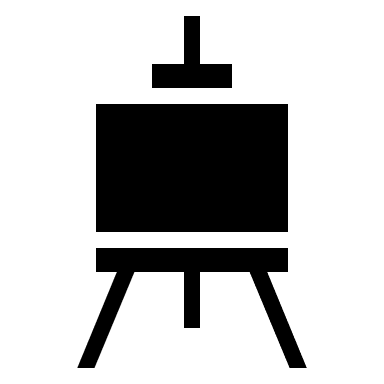
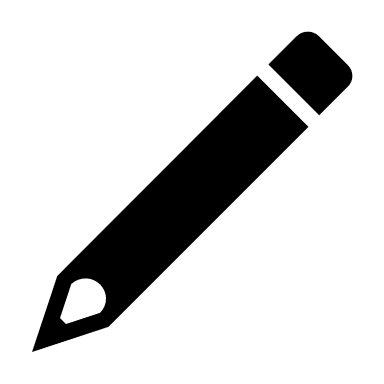
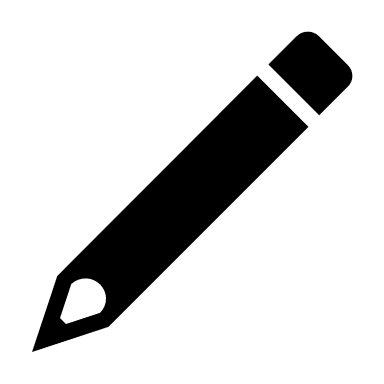
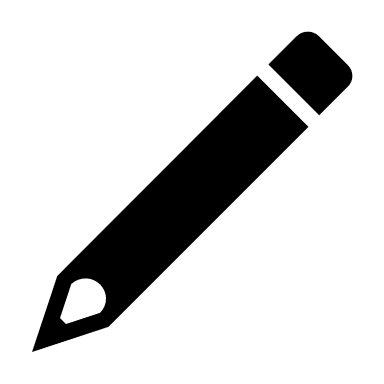
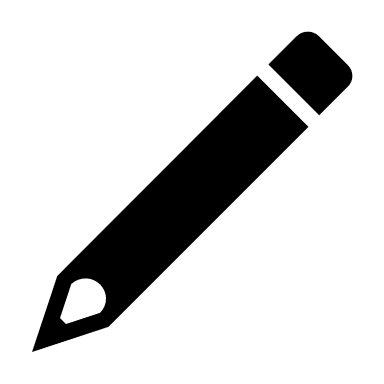
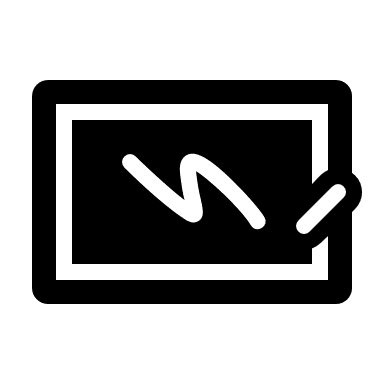
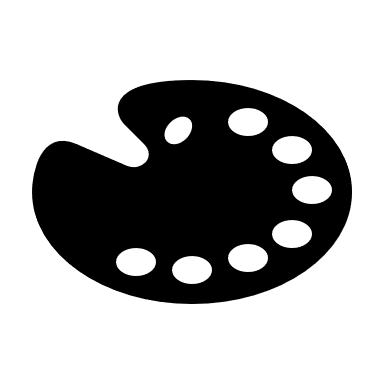
**WRITING INSTRUMENTS**

**COLOUR MARKERS**

**81%**

**56%**

**CHALK**



Source: Prepared by the authors based on sales research data from “U.S. Consumption Trends by Week General Merchandise: Dollar Change Versus Year Ago,” The NPD Group, accessed March 21, 2021, www.npd.com/wps/portal/npd/us/news/coronavirus.

EXHIBIT 4: OMNICHANNEL GLOSSARY OF TERMS

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **TERM** | **DESCRIPTION** |
| Showrooming | Viewing the product in a store and buying it from that retailer’s website |
| Webrooming | Researching online and buying the product in a store |
| Click-and-Collect, BOPIS | Buy online, pick-up in store |
| Click-and-Collect, BOPAC | Buy online, pick-up at curbside |
| Scan-and-Scram | View a product in a store and buy it from another retailer online |
| Click-and-Ship | View a product in a store and buy it online (from that same store) |
| Omnishopping | Enabling customers to shop any place and any way they want |
| Phytigal | Combination of physical and digital retailing—shopping in store, researching online, and buying in store |
| Collaborator | Person or entity that works with another entity (i.e., customer, distributor, supplier, retailer, social media channel, etc.) |

Source: Prepared by the authors based on information from Criteo, *Omnichannel Marketing Terms*, accessed March 21, 2021, www.criteo.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Criteo-17-Omnichannel-Glossary-Final.pdf.

EXHIBIT 5: The MICHAELS Companies Inc. 2020 Selected FINANCIAL RESULTS  
(in US$ Million)

**First Quarter of 2020**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **13 Weeks Ended May 2, 2020** | **13 Weeks Ended May 4, 2019** |
| Net Sales | $799.9 | $1,093.7 |
| Comparable Store Sales | –27.6% | —2.9% |
| Operating (Loss) Income | ($60.7) | $92.7 |
| Net (Loss) Income | ($63.5) | $37.7 |

**Second Quarter of 2020**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **13 Weeks Ended August 1, 2020** | **13 Weeks Ended August 3, 2019** | **26 Weeks Ended August 1, 2020** | **26 Weeks Ended August 3, 2019** |
| Net Sales | $1,148.2 | $1,033.7 | $1,948.1 | $2,127.4 |
| Comparable Store Sales | 12.0% | 0.3% | (8.4%) | (1.4%) |
| Operating Income (Loss) | $53.3 | $71.3 | ($7.4 | $164.0 |
| Net (Loss) Income | ($7.8) | $24.5 | ($71.3) | $62.2 |

Source: “The Michaels Companies Announce Second Quarter Fiscal 2020 Results,” Business Wire, September 3, 2020, accessed March 21, 2021, www.businesswire.com/news/home/20200903005201/en/The-Michaels-Companies-Announces-Second-Quarter-Fiscal-2020-Results.

ENDNOTES

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