



How to talk to customers about facial coverings:

Talking about wearing masks can sometimes be tricky, and even uncomfortable. As part of the pledge to provide COVID-19 safe spaces, businesses need to ensure the indoor environment is safe for everyone. This means, everyone needs to be masked up.

Here are some suggestions for making a plan with your employees on how to talk with customers who are not wearing facial coverings:

1. Provide masks for free for anyone who is not wearing a mask when entering.
2. Place a trained employee by the door: someone who can talk with any potential non-maskers. Try this opening line:

'Welcome! We are so glad you are visiting our business. We are doing our best to comply with the statewide mask order, would you mind wearing a mask while you are inside? We have some here if you don't have one.'

3. Empower employees to handle the conflict. Have a training session on how to handle a disgruntled customer, and then **Role Play**. Have your team simulate a tense situation and see how employees might handle it. It's better to work out the kinks in training than in a real situation.
 - a. **Make sure your entire team is informed of the rules** so they can properly answer any questions customers may have. Make sure your team is using the same messaging and enforcing the rules the same way to avoid any confusion.
 - b. **Use empathetic communication:** our country is facing a tense time, and that tension is showing itself in the form of stressed customers. Make sure your employees know they need to avoid getting frustrated and respond to complaints with a respectful and empathetic tone. For example:
 - "Do as you choose at other times of course, but could we agree that just for now, you wear a mask inside our business?"

- "I respect that it is important to you to be skeptical, and I agree that the recommendations change often. But since the evidence definitely shows that even some young, healthy people can get seriously ill, could I ask you to wear a mask while you're inside our business?"
- c. **Train them to first listen to the customer's complaints, without assuming they already know how they're going to respond.** The very first interaction with that person can determine the entirety of the conversation. So if your employee first approaches the customer from an inquiry standpoint, rather than presumption, the situation could be de-escalated before it even gets bad.
- d. **Be transparent.** Your employee should lay out the rules, but also accommodate any circumstances that may apply to them (ie. disabilities). If the customer simply doesn't want to acknowledge your policy, first reiterate what the rules are in the establishment, and then try to understand what the actual reasoning is behind their refusal. For example, if their reasoning is that they feel the requirements are taking away their liberty, respond by highlighting that it's the business's liberty to decide who can be in the building. Or that the statewide order currently states that masking inside businesses is mandatory and you are just abiding by it. You can compare this safety order to laws about seat belts: they are in place for the greater safety of the community.
- e. **Apologize.** For the inconvenience while also following the earlier tip of telling customers this is a statewide order and not your own.
- f. **Don't debate. Calmly de-escalate. Use positive, direct language.** Train your employees not to point fingers or get involved in an argument that will further escalate the situation. Stay calm, take their complaints seriously, be personal, and even be friendly—most people will respond well to someone who is calm.
- g. **Suggest alternatives.** Arm your employees with alternative solutions to help resolve the conflict. If your customer doesn't want to follow the rules for no valid reason, offer another way for them to shop: if you have curbside pickup, inform the customer that the policy keeps everyone safe. Let them know they can utilize these alternative business models.
- h. **Know when to ask for help.** Even if your employee is equipped with the best training on how to handle disgruntled customers, they must know their limits and know when to ask for help. Establish a hierarchy for when a team member needs help with a complaining customer. Plan who the employee should turn to and when. This could be a manager for the particularly unhappy customers, or in the worst situations, if you feel threatened and the customer refuses to leave, law enforcement.