

Frontline workers are forced to become COVID mask police. It's stressing them out

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People wearing masks in downtown Los Angeles at Grand Central Market. The responsibility for enforcing mask requirements largely falls on employees.

(Kent Nishimura / Los Angeles Times)

The alert went out to Johann Baqueiro: A customer was sipping her Starbucks coffee inside the Ralphs supermarket and she wasn't wearing a face mask.

As a meat department manager, Baqueiro usually is focused on keeping customers happy with just the right cut for that night's dinner. But the other day, Baqueiro found himself once again leaving the meat counter to deal with another barefaced customer.

The Ralphs grocery chain and its Kroger Co. parent last month established a policy requiring all customers to wear masks, as employees already had been doing. Yet at the market in Cypress where Baqueiro works, and at a host of other consumer-serving businesses, employees have few options to get recalcitrant customers to comply.

“We asked her, ‘Ma’am, would you mind putting on your mask?’ ” Baqueiro said, hoping that the woman would down her drink outside and then return to finish shopping. “She goes, ‘No, I just spent three bucks on this coffee, I’m enjoying it. I’m not going to put on my mask until I’m done with it.’”

Baqueiro said he then watched helplessly as the customer blew on the coffee to cool it, launching potentially virus-laden droplets in his direction.

Several of America’s biggest brands have said they are now requiring customers to wear masks to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus. But in many cases, the requirements are more like requests, not mandates that will be strictly enforced.



Moreover, the workers who must approach the maskless are often the same frontline clerks who have long been among those most exposed to the virus. And the new duties are amping up their already high stress level.



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That's unacceptable, labor leaders say. Even though the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and health professionals agree that wearing masks is one of the best ways to fight the pandemic, the coverings have become the centerpiece of yet another highly political culture war.

“To help save lives, every retailer and grocery store across this nation must adopt a mask requirement, and enforcement must be done by trained professionals, not retail workers already stretched thin during this pandemic,” said Marc Perrone, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, which represents 1.3 million members in the grocery, retail, meatpacking, food processing, distillery, cannabis and chemical industries.

“COVID-19 cases will continue to skyrocket across the country until the president, mayors and governors step up and make masks mandatory at every supermarket and retail store,” Perrone said. Otherwise, “this deadly pandemic will continue to cost workers' lives and wreak havoc on our economy.”

Beyond state and local government mask mandates, face coverings are required at pretty much all of the well-known names among retail chains, fast-food restaurants, hotels and other consumer-serving businesses.

Walmart is handling the mask divide by creating the new position of health ambassador — employees in black polo-style shirts who are assigned to greet maskless customers, encourage them to cover up and provide a disposable mask if shoppers somehow don't have one at this stage of the pandemic.

The workers receive training that includes conflict de-escalation skills, Walmart said, but have no authority to prevent resistant customers from going about their shopping.

“We're trying to keep people safe from COVID, but we're also trying to keep our associates away from unreasonable people who may become physical with them,” Walmart spokesman Casey Staley said. “We've seen that at our stores and local retailers across the country where there have been disputes over simply asking someone to wear a mask.”

Ultimately, the customer prevails so that mask requests don't turn ugly, he said. “We're not going to bar entrance to anyone,” Staley said.

McDonald's said it wants people to wear masks inside the company's fast-food eateries, but if that's not happening, the backup plan is to speed up and isolate.



A customer wearing a mask passes a McDonald's restaurant in Brooklyn that is open for takeout service.

(Mark Lennihan / Associated Press)

If the customer declines to wear a mask, McDonald's policy is to expedite the order and guide the customer to a pickup spot at a safe distance from other customers.

McDonald's employee Jose Nuñez isn't impressed.

"It's great that they have responded to our protests and finally required customers to wear masks. But how will that be enforced?" asked the Los Angeles resident, who is a leader in the Fight for \$15 movement to improve fast-food worker wages.

"A company that makes billions of dollars a year is now expecting workers it pays minimum wage to police a culture war we are not trained for and that could put us in danger," Nuñez said.

Mask disputes only add to an already high level of stress in pandemic-era customer and employee relations, experts say.

“A company must make employee safety a top priority, and putting them on the front lines of the battle over masks threatens their physical and emotional safety,” brand consultant and author Denise Lee Yohn said. “Plus, they probably already have enough operational changes to deal with. Taking on one more responsibility can be overwhelming.”

Operators of stores, restaurants and other businesses should consider hiring security guards to enforce mask and social distancing mandates, and to handle any backlash, said Yohn, who has written extensively about the importance of happy employees to brand performance, especially in times like these.

Raquel Solario, 55, works at a Ralphs store in San Diego. Four other household members also are employed by Kroger Co., which owns the Ralphs and Food 4 Less chains. All were heartened by an additional \$2 an hour in “hero pay,” which ended in mid-May, as well as additional thank-you bonuses paid in installments, but they are feeling anxious at work, she said.

“We are working longer hours under stressful conditions,” she said. “When Kroger gave us ‘hero pay,’ it felt like we mattered and they were recognizing the risks we are taking.”

“You fear that you might take the virus home to your family. I’ve had customers swear at me when we ask them to wear a mask,” Solario said. “After work each day, I want to cry, but I don’t have the tears to cry because it’s not going to make things better.”

Kroger’s approach of enforcing its mask policy using store workers rather than special security personnel is typical among consumer businesses.

Kroger responded to written questions with a statement detailing its mask policy and history of “hero pay” and bonuses, noting: “In the current environment some customers may react emotionally to our facial mask requirement. Our management team has been prepared to manage these tense situations as they occur and have been provided with de-escalation procedures.”

The company is making mental health resources, emergency leave and financial assistance available to workers, Kroger said.

Even with policies and government mandates in place, potentially virus-spreading behavior is apparent even at places that have promised to prevent it.

Non-enforcement of mask and social distancing rules was on display during a July 18 rooftop pool party at the W Hotel in Hollywood, according to a video shot by a hotel employee. The video first aired on KNBC news July 30, which noted that the scene was

recorded two weeks after a Los Angeles County health inspector made a surprise visit and found the hotel in compliance with county guidelines requiring that hotels ensure social distancing at their pools.

Dozens of people are seen clustered together around the pool in the video, even though operators are required to limit pool use so that swimmers and sunbathers can maintain a six-foot distance. Few are wearing masks. The W hotel, part of a luxury chain owned by Marriott International Inc., requires face coverings at all indoor public areas, according to its website.

Kurt Petersen, a co-president of Unite Here Local 11, which represents hospitality workers in Southern California, said the video shows disregard for the safety of workers and guests at the hotel.

“The W hotel management looked the other way because they value revenue more than employee and guest safety and because there are no consequences to flouting county safety directives,” he said. “Our members want to work, but they don’t believe management is serious about safety.”

Mark Eberwein, the W hotel’s general manager, said: “The well-being of our guests and associates is of paramount importance. We are aware of the situation, and we are looking into it.”

Becoming a mask and distance enforcer is something grocery worker Baqueiro, 44, said he could never have imagined.

Baqueiro, who is a union shop steward, said he advises other union members to read from a card handed out by the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union when they need to confront a customer who isn’t following the rule.

“The card says, ‘I’m exercising my legal right to a healthy and safe workplace by refusing service to any customer not wearing a mask. It is my right to insist on maintaining six feet between myself and any customer who is not wearing a mask,’” Baqueiro said.

In terms of family loyalty to a company, it would be hard to beat the Baqueiro clan and its ties to the Ralphs grocery chain. Johann has worked for the company since 1997. Wife Patricia is a Starbucks barista at a Ralphs store; son Johann Jr. is a Ralphs clerk; daughter Krystal is a Ralphs cashier.

As a Latino and a diabetic, Baqueiro said he is doubly worried about developing COVID-19. Both groups have been hit hard by the virus.

And then there’s the elderly aunt he supports, who raised him when he was a boy. She is diabetic as well.

“If one of us brings the virus home, she’s done,” Baqueiro said.

Baqueiro said 14 co-workers at the two Ralphs stores where his family works have tested positive for the virus.

“Nowadays, it’s like my wife and I put it, we’re playing Russian roulette with four bullets.”
