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Retailers Pick Sides as Debate on Masks Reignites

New guidelines from the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention have paved the way for a return to normalcy. Fashion and beauty purveyors must weigh the risks and rewards of following suit.



The United States Centres of Disease Control said fully vaccinated people didn't need masks, indoor or outdoor, in most situations throwing a curveball at retailers that thought they had safety protocols buttoned up. Getty Images.

BY SHEENA BUTLER-YOUNG

MAY 21, 2021 04:30

Until last week, retailers assumed they had their pandemic safety protocols buttoned up. But, in an announcement that came as a surprise to many, the United States Centres for Disease Control and Prevention on May 13 said fully vaccinated people didn't need masks, indoors or outdoors, in most situations. Meanwhile, New York partially lifted its mask mandate on Wednesday, joining states like Texas and Florida that did so weeks ago. In the United Kingdom, most lockdown restrictions are expected to be lifted on June 21, though the government hasn't yet said whether mask requirements will be among them.

For retailers, this creates new complications. Throughout the pandemic, they could point to government regulations to force people to wear masks in stores, a requirement that protected the health of customers and employees that was nevertheless unpopular among some shoppers. That conversation gets harder if consumers interpret last week's announcements to mean masks are no longer required for the vaccinated.

And even if that were the case, store employees have no easy way to enforce a more-nuanced mask policy. Early in the pandemic, store associates from shoe brands like Skechers to major retailers such as Target made headlines after they were physically assaulted while trying to enforce still-evolving mask guidelines.

“The question I keep getting from a lot of retailers is ‘how do we know if someone is fully vaccinated?’ and ‘is it even safe for me to ask for documentation, given how people [sometimes] react?’” said Blythe Adamson, an epidemiologist and economist who has been helping retailers reopen amid the pandemic.

The landscape has changed: masks are no longer a novelty, and many stores have invested in everything from sanitisation stations and thermometers to store signage and personal protective equipment to help both employees and customers stay safe. Still, some establishments only grudgingly followed local mask requirements, and are as eager to toss face coverings aside as some shoppers.

Either way, many retailers aren’t ready to change course just yet.

Jessica Richards, founder of Shen, a beauty store in Brooklyn, said she and her five salesfloor associates will continue to ask customers to leave the store if they refuse to wear a face covering — although she said it hasn’t been much of an issue in her part of the country. About 44 percent of New York state residents are fully vaccinated, compared with the national average of 38 percent. “I have no problem asking people to leave the store if they [refuse to comply] — those customers who don’t want to wear a mask are not the shoppers for Shen,” she said.

In Idaho, where the vaccination rate is about 36 percent and resistance to both masks and shots are more widespread, Marie Widmyer, owner of women’s clothing stores Marmalade and Marie’s Boutique, said she hasn’t ever required employees or shoppers to wear masks. Instead, she encourages social distancing, where possible and has instructed her employees to follow the lead of shoppers.

“I tell [store associates] to feel our shoppers out — if the customer is wearing a mask, ‘you should put one on to make them comfortable in our store,’” she said, adding that about 50 percent of her employees are fully vaccinated.

Whether or not state regulations and CDC guidelines change, Marmalade and Marie’s Boutique will continue with the system it has in place for at least the next 30 days.

In the United Kingdom, where about 37 million people, or 31 percent of the population, are fully vaccinated, shop owners are keeping an eye on any changes to the government's masking guidelines but some said they, too, are unlikely to make sudden changes to their existing protocols.

"I fully understand the eagerness of people who want to go back to a normal life and forget about the year we just had and to believe that we are in really, for the first time after all these months, coming out of all this," said Stavros Karelis, buying director of Machine-A, a unisex clothing and accessories store in London. "But I think we all need to [continue to] have a bit of patience and take the right steps to protect everyone for the [long-term]."

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Machine-A's staffers will continue to wear masks and ask the same of shoppers, many of whom are younger Gen-Z and millennials who are not yet qualified for vaccination in the UK. (In England, only people aged 36 or over are eligible for vaccines.)

"We also have a lot of international travellers in our stores and it's way too complicated right now to [try to police vaccinations]," he added.

A New Era of Hygiene

For many fashion firms, pandemic-induced safety changes aren't easy to undo and some are seeing benefits even beyond the current health crisis.

Shen's Richards had been planning to transition to a new space prior to the pandemic and considers it a stroke of luck that the move happened during the health crisis because it meant she could build out the store with a "sanitary air system," a dedicated sink for hand washing and other Covid-era safety measures.

Companies like Nike have similarly designed their newest outposts with Covid-19 friendly features like "guided lighting" to encourage social distancing. And even if the coronavirus pandemic becomes a thing of the past, experts like Adamson warn that more health crises could crop up and there are few disadvantages to maintaining "better air quality" and some social distancing in confined spaces moving forward.

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The high-touch beauty industry, for example, has been motivated by the pandemic to resolve long-standing pain points surrounding hygiene, said Richards.

“Beauty is incredibly sensorial and, at retail, people have [always wanted] to try, test and experience and smell the product,” she said.

To allow people to test products, Richards said she created “painter palettes” where “we take a little bit of the product and we put it on there and we hand it to the customer and they use biodegradable bamboo makeup brushes to try it on.” She has no plans to abandon this solution after Covid-19.

Similarly, Adamson said she’s encouraging retailers to maintain masking requirements for employees for now. Long-term, though, she advises leaders not to “cling too tightly to any specific policy” as circumstances are likely to continue to evolve.

“Any investment a retailer makes should be made with the knowledge that Covid-19 policies are dynamic and that the CDC could change their guidelines on masks, again, by either walking it back [completely] or modifying it at any time,” she said.