

De-escalating tips for face covering conversations

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The statewide face covering mandate presents concerns for retailers as incidents have occurred where asking customers to follow safety guidelines has resulted in agitated customers and willful non-compliance.

The National Retail Federation, one of Washington Retail's national partners, recently published "How to de-escalate tense situations: Tips for retailers." As part of Washington Retail's efforts to provide Retail Re-opening Resources, we have summarized this article with Washington State specific face covering facts.

- Treat people with dignity: apply empathy by seeing the world through the other person's eyes.
- Listen with all senses: consider your own facial expression, eye-contact, hand gestures, and tone of voice from start to finish.
- Build a relationship first: introduce yourself gently and express appreciation for their patronage of your store.
- Inquire if an exemption applies in their case: ask if the customer falls within one of the exemptions allowed under the Governor's safe reopening plan.
- Offer an apology: make it easier for people to keep listening by first apologizing that your store's face covering poster may not have caught their attention.
- Explain the mandate and the safety benefit of face covering: become fluent in referencing how COVID transmission probability could be reduced from 90% when two people aren't wearing masks to 1.5% when both people wear masks.
- Offering options is a powerful dis-arming tool: provide a few free face covering options from which they could choose; some fun patterns could even turn into a relationship building or marketing opportunity.
- Don't take a no as no: a quick no comes from feelings so you may give them a chance to reconsider. It can turn into a yes.

Going over the following five communication breakdown basic indicators should be part of your employee training.

- Distance management: keep a safe distance when talking to customers to prevent possible discomfort including the spread of the virus.
- Positioning matters: monitoring where and how a person stands are clues to the level of respect they show.
- Tone of voice: observing a person's voice is an indicator of their frustration level.

- Word choice: listening for words that connote feelings of insult, disrespect, rudeness, intimidation or threats.
- Hand movements: watching for fist tightening or other signs of fight readiness are indicators of a possible safety violation.

De-escalation training can make confrontations a rarity. Role-playing scenarios that may lead to confrontation are highly recommended.

The outcome is not in our control, but we are responsible for the process.

