

**WholeFoods Magazine
Merchandising Insights
July 2021**

MASK II—THE SEQUEL: WHIPLASH!
OR, ON AGAIN, OFF AGAIN

By Jay Jacobowitz

On May 16, 2021, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control updated its COVID-19 guidance for wearing masks:

“If you’ve been fully vaccinated: You can resume activities that you did prior to the pandemic.

“You can resume activities without wearing a mask or staying 6 feet apart, except where required by federal, state, local, tribal, or territorial laws, rules, and regulations, including local business and workplace guidance.”

As recently as six weeks before, on March 3, 2021, CDC Director, Rochelle Walensky, had said, “I think the next two or three months could go in one of two directions. If things open up, if we’re not really cautious, we could end up with a post-spring break surge the way we saw a post-Christmas surge. We could see much more disease. We could see much more death.”

The following day, March 4, as Texas and Mississippi announced plans to relax mask mandates statewide, President Biden reinforced the message with, “The last thing we need is Neanderthal thinking that in the meantime everything’s fine, take off your mask; forget it. It still matters.”

Natural organic retailers, some of the most front-line, public-facing businesses in the country, were certainly feeling their necks snap in reaction to the policy reversal. Here follows reaction from independents around the country as retailers scrambled to gauge the sentiment of their customers and employees. Some enlightened, common solutions emerge.

Southern Retailer: “This [the CDC mask guidelines update] has gotten way too complicated. What we did in our Texas store, we went to masks being optional. Employees were so sick of wearing them, they took them off. If a customer walks in wearing a mask, we ask if they are uncomfortable if we are not, and mask up if so. Most employees have taken off the masks, and only two or three still wear them, who are older, or have other health conditions, or just feel that’s the way to do it.

“Customers that come in wearing a mask ask if it is mandatory, and take them off when we say it is optional. A lot are independent minded, so have no problem we’ve made it optional. I personally still wear a mask, due to immune concerns. As soon as some people got vaccinated, they took the mask off. A lot seem to feel that way. My sister thinks we’re crazy for not wearing masks, due to the variants coming up, from Brazil, Japan, and India.

“Most other people feel it should be a choice if the individual wants to take a risk. Many aren’t convinced the masks made a difference. There have been so many hypotheses, we don’t know what to believe. On top of more than a year in lockdown, everyone is stir crazy. So, some feel, if you’ve made it this far, you’re alive or you’re dead, and ‘since I have to live, I’ll take my chances and take the mask off.’ Having the optional sign on our doors seems to be working. Our store owner, because she’s 80, wears a mask when she’s in the store.

“Employees have masks with them, to accommodate the customer who isn’t comfortable. We made it optional because our employees were so sick and tired of the mandate. We thought, if we continued to keep the mask rule, we’d have a revolt.

“Some customers ask us, ‘Do you want us to mask up?’ When we say it is optional, if they are wearing a mask, they rip it off. One customer asked why we weren’t wearing a mask. As soon as she asked, we masked up. Staff was supposed to ask everyone wearing a mask. So we reeducated our employees on the protocol to ask any customer wearing a mask first, before they have to ask us.

“On our sales, so far, we are holding our own. We realized there’s a sales bell curve. Every other month or so, the refill regimen kicks in, then the next month, we get into that valley, where we think we’re dying, but it is just the replenishment cycle. When we took a look at the customers who were coming back, it made us feel better.”

Midwest Retailer: “With the new CDC guidelines, we have taken our signs down from the doors that say wear masks. I don’t know if it is popular, since I still see signs everywhere I go. We are still asking—gently, not requiring—employees to wear masks. That’s no problem, in our three larger stores. Those employees want to wear masks, and it is rare in those stores to see a customer without. In our smaller stores, more rural, with less customers coming in, we tell employees to please mirror what the customer does, and everyone needs to mirror the most conservative customer.

“We still have Plexiglas up, although I plan to take it down soon, to take that next step, which is my personal desire to lead the way back to normal, rather than being the last one to be dragged back to normal. So we are in the middle of that. We are mirroring what we see our customers want. We think it is right regardless of federal, or local requirements. We are encouraging people to walk away from the fear, and to feel confident getting back to life, and human people.

“Sales in most of our stores have not been affected by the recent updates in CDC guidelines, except for one of our stores in a more rural, lower population density area, where a small group of people are angry because we don’t have someone standing at the door enforcing masks. As a result, we are on their “do not shop” list which has affected sales a bit in that store. Outside of that, sales remain very strong, at only 3% down year-to-date from last year. That is remarkable considering we were up 19.65% last year! As a note, I had projected/expected about a 7% decrease in sales.”

Northeast Retailer: “Things are good. Seemingly we have made it through this pandemic, although it is still raging elsewhere. We are vaccinated, and things are opening up in our neighborhood. The new CDC guidelines kind of coincide with our State, where the mask mandate ends May 29th. Masks won’t be required outdoors, or in most public and private places, except public transportation, and hospitals. And it is up to the business to determine what to do. We can still have tighter regulations, as long as they are posted, and enforced equally; mask, shoes, whatever, we have the authority to set ground rules, as long as we see fit.

“My first thought on hearing of the new CDC guidelines was ‘Oh, S—t! Put the onus on us, the retailers.’ We decided to maintain our mask policy for all employees and customers until June 15th, when our State, state-of-emergency officially ends. I’m not clear exactly what that means, but it is a helpful date. That way, with the May 16th CDC announcement, it gives us a month for caseloads to drop, and gives us time to check how staff and customers and employees are feeling, and to see what other businesses are doing.

“Even though the mandate still stands in our store today, a couple of customers have made an issue about why we are doing that, but most have expressed gratitude that we are continuing to require masks. And our staff also is fine continuing with masks. Our employees are vaccinated, but are more concerned than most people who are not on the front lines serving the public. The mask provides a level of comfort. We’ve been through a hellish year, with the team on the front lines. While it’s not the same as in a hospital, they are exposed to the public.

“So frankly, among our employees, there’s been a level of trauma. So the mask has been acting as a safety net, and there is an adjustment to removing it. Some employees are thinking it will be okay when vaccinations are at a certain rate. Others are immunocompromised, and being extra careful. We are still in this indoor space, which is well ventilated, and we’re keeping the doors open, but it is not zero risk. So the thinking goes, ‘Why not wear it a bit longer, to ensure optimum safety?’

“We may also extend the mask rule in-store beyond the June 15th, end of the State state-of-emergency order, based on all these issues. Even outdoors, the mandate is lifted, but many people in our area are still wearing masks outside.

“Customer responses have ranged from sheer gratitude for us keeping the wear-mask policy in place to sentiments like, ‘I’m fully vaccinated. Why can’t I come in without my mask?’ Also, because we are in the natural organic industry, consistent with the mindset in the natural products world, some customers have the idea that they don’t believe in COVID, the risks, or the vaccine. We get comments in our newsletter and on our social media like, ‘I take care of my immune system with supplements, why do I need this fabric around my face?’ Just a few of these dissenters pop up, which seems to be less than other places in the country.

“I was surprised the guidelines went so quickly from the idea that it wasn’t clear whether the vaccine would protect against transmission, to building the case that it does. A few months ago, it was you could only gather with vaccinated people, and that it is safe indoors, but still be cautious, only in small groups, and only be with those with close connections, then all of a sudden it morphed into, ‘Okay, great! Go anywhere and do anything with anyone!’ It’s like whiplash compared to spending the rest of the summer being cautious, the new fact that things are relatively good; the COVID case load is dropping, and you don’t have to get tested.

“In our area, population tends to empty out in the summertime, so we anticipate sales will fall as people travel out of town, and staff starts planning bigger vacations, but we’ll have to wait and see. Also there has been a dramatic pickup in in-store sales vs. pickup, and we anticipate that in-store sales growth will outpace online sales growth.

“Since the beginning of May, in-store sales have really picked up. We realized we had to keep a higher inventory on hand. Out-of-stocks are still not back to normal. There are still some issues, such as the challenges in switching distributors. I estimate we are still 10% to 20% out-of-stock.

“In May, we extended our hours, because more people are out shopping. We do better sales when people are in-store vs. online, where you can only search so many products. In-store there is more impulse buying. We had to adjust what inventory to carry because customer counts were up, and there’s more product discovery in-store. For example, you only need two bug spray options online, vs. 15 in-store. When people walk in and see bug spray, they instantly remember, ‘That’s my favorite brand.’ Whereas online, it’s just about what’s available, and keeping it quick and easy. You are reminded of your favorite option when you are shopping in-store.”

Southeast Retailer: “Our city and State ordinance had ceased in April, but we were still following CDC guidelines. Our State government said we’re not requiring, but suggest you continue wearing masks. Our sign in April said, ‘State and CDC guidelines say, in indoor venues, wear a mask, maintain physical distance, and wash hands often.’ When CDC came out with this latest guidance in May, we just took the sign down, because it was not relevant.

“Some employees, and some customers are wearing masks, and some are not. Some customers questioned the relaxation in the mask rule, and we cited the relaxed CDC guidance. Anyone on the side of ‘You should enforce,’ has no idea what that means. For months, we answered the question saying the State requires it. Most employees are still wearing their masks, out of concern for customers’ concerns.

“We are not asking if customers are vaccinated. We assume that people will be responsible about wearing a mask or not now that the guidelines have been relaxed. This has been the most confusing guidance, and the most stressful time, that I have ever gone through as a business owner. “In our State, we don’t have as active of a health department checking on us. We shut down the bulk bins, but nobody ever told us we had to. We’ve had the bulk department reopened for gravity feed for a while now, and the rest will be reopened in June. We have new pourable herb containers, rather than reach a spoon in. They are in glass jars, with a plastic lid. They are smaller, for better grasping.

“I expected to hear more negativity from the pro maskers, but if they are talking about it, it is not coming to my attention. Last year when I got slammed on Facebook because of what I said to the City Council about what they were planning—a mandate just for grocery stores and pharmacies—I had people say they would never shop with me again. I was simply asking the City Council, how do you plan to monitor it? And why only these venues? They are not the hot spots, like crowded restaurants and bars. ‘We need guidance on how you plan to enforce the mandate. I do not think it is appropriate for my employees to be bouncers. Who will enforce? What is our responsibility if you do pass this mandate?’ They ended up passing a different rule and giving guidance to businesses on what their responsibility was.

“As far as our sales, I can’t really tell yet anything due to the new CDC guidance. Most customers are still wearing masks and most employees are as well. More people are not wearing masks than before, though. We’ve been a bit sluggish in May, which is kind of typical for this time of year, because university ended in the first part of May and restarts at the end of May. People are going out of town more with the relaxed guidelines, so weekends have been slower.

“We have been serving to-go only in our deli since last March [2020] when the pandemic hit. Our plan was to open back up this June with the relaxed guidelines. We have not been able to proceed with that plan because we are having trouble finding deli workers to hire to bring our staff back up to par for full service in-house dining. I’m sure our sales will be better when we are able to open up in-house again because the deli sales alone have been about 50% of pre-COVID sales. Plus the traffic that the lunch business drives will increase.”

West Coast Retailer: “Our store policy is that we follow CDC and State guidelines. With the new updated CDC mask guidelines, we removed our mask requirement. We would not have done that if our governor had not followed right afterwards with the same guidelines as CDC. I was surprised the governor did that. That was a Thursday afternoon. We talked about it the next morning, opened it up on Friday afternoon, and took the signs down.

“We had lots of grinning employees. It just changed the atmosphere for the employees and for some of the customers, both in those with masks and those with no masks. The energy just seemed to flow fine. It is definitely busier in the store. We were starting to get busier already in April in our two stores, as well.

“People are ready to get out. In the deli, there were numerous people I hadn’t seen in a long time, saying things like, ‘I haven’t been out, I’m so glad to be out!’ One customer wearing a mask asked, since she was fully vaccinated, could she take it off. I said yes, and she immediately ripped off the mask. Both customers with and without masks seem to be comfortable with each other.

“A few have complained. One customer asked if the cooks in the deli were wearing masks. We said that they are vaccinated, so no, they are not wearing masks. Hearing that, she threw her food down and said, ‘I’m never coming back here.’ I later found out this particular customer does that often at the store; complains about something and threatens to never come back, but keeps coming back. The complainers are all regulars who feel very comfortable telling us how they think we should be handling things. ‘I think you are starting too soon, wait a while on the new CDC guidelines.’

“The biggest issue is, the customers and employees who are against vaccinations are going to take the masks off immediately. We knew this was going to happen. You can’t ask them if they are vaccinated, so we knew there would be

people that would just take the masks off even though they are not vaccinated. We do require that employees have a mask in their pocket at all times so if a customer has a mask, they can put it on, or ask the customer if they are comfortable if the employee does not wear a mask.

“Employees who are delivering the pick-up orders at the curb still have to wear a mask, because those customers are still not comfortable coming into the store. We still have ‘vulnerable-customer’ hours, one hour, two days a week, 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. Wednesdays and 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. Sundays, which is when a lot of seniors shop.

“We also have a new State regulation to keep an employee vaccination log. We know we are going to have a big brouhaha next week, so we are waiting until after the Memorial Day holiday, because we don’t want a lot of anger brewing over the weekend. The new rule is posted on the Governor’s website, and it’s on the news. Businesses have to keep a log, and employees must state if they are vaccinated or not, and show their vaccination card or self-attest, and sign a statement affirming that. So, we are coming up with a memo explaining the new policy, and a log.

“We know certain employees are not vaccinated. Most are smart enough to not say anything about it. There are a couple who have said things like, ‘I’m never getting vaccinated, and I’m never going to wear a mask again.’ Our human resources lawyer has said you can take an action if the employee is not vaccinated, divulges that information, and is not wearing a mask. It is, as always, just a few people. One of these anti-vax employees told her manager that too many of her customers are vulnerable, so even though she personally does not want to wear a mask, does so out of concern for her customers’ well-being.” JJ