

# SERVICE WITH A SMILE?

Delivering customer experience  
in the face of mask wearing

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**IPSOS  
VIEWS**

GAME CHANGERS



Governments across the world have mandated a host of health and safety-related measures, including the wearing of face masks, to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Many of these regulations mean that customer experiences have fundamentally changed, putting consumers and businesses into an unprecedented state of uncertainty.

Against this backdrop, we wanted to investigate the extent to which wearing face masks impacts our ability to foster human rapport and build strong relationships, by impairing our facial perception and communication skills. Of course, this matters for brands that need to create and foster those strong relationships with their customers, including at specific touchpoints – the assistant helping a customer in-store, the teller in a bank branch, and so on.

Consumers are on board with governments and brands doing the right thing. For example, Ipsos found in February 2021 that virtually all (97%) vaccinated Americans report wearing a mask when they left home in the last week.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, in a separate study, almost two-thirds (64%) of Canadians told us they would stop, or temporarily stop, shopping at a location that doesn't take health and safety seriously.<sup>2</sup>

**This paper sets out to provide guidance to those charged with designing and delivering customer experiences in this new world. How does an organisation create meaningful 'masked moments' that encourage customers to return, spend and recommend – ultimately delivering competitive advantage and the right business outcomes, while also ensuring that customers and staff stay safe?**





# THE IMPORTANCE OF FACE PERCEPTION IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

Before looking at the impact of face masks, we first need to understand the role of face perception in establishing and building human relationships. Based on the information gleaned from the visual appearance of faces, we access information about the identity of another person. We make inferences about mood, level of interest, and intentions. In simple terms, we use information conveyed by the face to help us work out what a person might be thinking or meaning. Indeed, face perception is perhaps the most developed visual perceptual skill in humans and plays a critical role in social interactions. Covering critical features on a human face might, therefore, have an impact on such interaction at several levels.

The expression on someone's face allows us to understand their emotional state to such an extent that we might even get to experience their emotion. Perception of fear in the face of another has been found, consistently, to evoke a response in the amygdala, the brain region linked to the experience of fear.<sup>3</sup> The perception of disgust in the face of another has been found to evoke a response in the anterior insula, the region associated with processing smells and visceral sensations. For many, an emotion seen is an emotion shared, and a key trigger of empathy.

In addition, speech comprehension can be facilitated or modulated by the perception of speech-associated lip movements, even in people with 'normal' hearing. Lip reading improves hearing accuracy, and lip movements that are inconsistent with auditory speech can cause hearing errors, as shown by the McGurk effect.<sup>4</sup> In fact, lip reading evokes additional activity in auditory areas in the brain that are also activated by hearing spoken words. Essentially, seeing a person's lips helps individuals to hear them better.

**Given the importance of face perception in emotional recognition and speech comprehension, we wanted to understand the impact of face covering on these two important elements of social interaction, and ultimately on the customer experience.**

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# THE IMPACT OF MASK WEARING ON CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Recent ongoing studies carried out by researchers at the Center for Applied Research in Decision Making at Temple University, in the US, seek to understand the relationship between masking facial expressions and human rapport.<sup>5</sup> In partnership with Ipsos, the studies also measure the effect of mask wearing on customer experience, more generally.

These studies show that mask wearing has a significant impact on human ability to identify emotions, communicate and, hence, on customer experience and relationship building.

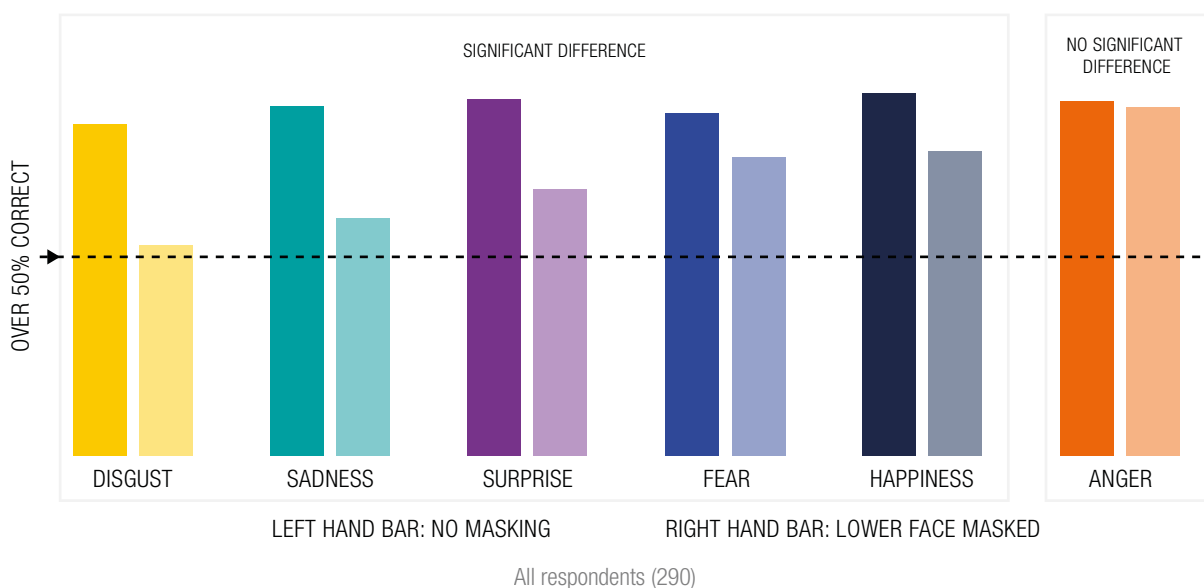
In the most recent study<sup>6</sup>, the analysis of facial recognition showed that happy faces are rated as less likeable and less warm when the bottom half of the face is covered, than in the case of unmasked faces. This means that something as simple as a smile loses some of its power to strengthen human relationships. This phenomenon is compounded by the fact that the participants also found it harder to actually identify happy faces when masked, versus unmasked.

We're certainly not suggesting that businesses should give up on smiling though! A happy face was still correctly identified more often than not. But, masked staff members can no longer rely so heavily on that 'winning smile' to bring round disgruntled customers, or to strengthen relationships.

Happiness was not the only emotion that participants found harder to identify when the bottom half of a face was masked. Disgust, sadness, surprise, and fear were also all less likely to be correctly identified, although again, in most cases, they were correctly recognised.

In fact, anger was the only emotion on which face masks had no impact, in perception terms. While this is 'good news' for staff as an angry customer would still be easily identifiable, it also means that staff cannot rely on masks to conceal their own anger, should they find themselves confronted with a difficult situation and respond in this way. Staff must therefore continue to manage/conceal their own anger, even when customers do not.

**Figure 1** Percentage correctly identifying each emotion



Source: Center for Applied Research in Decision Making at Temple University/Ipsos R&D

The effect of face masks on perception of emotions has implications for businesses seeking to build customer relationships, because it makes it harder for staff to recognise the emotional response of the customer and, hence, to empathise. This may unintentionally lead to more 'transactional' or detached interactions, simply because the staff member has failed to recognise the customer's emotional state, and thereby failed to intervene or respond in an appropriate way.

In order to respond appropriately to customers, staff will need to pay more attention to other cues, such as body language and tone of voice. Through doing this they can ensure that customers are/feel correctly treated, even if their expression of their needs is, quite literally, masked.

In the same study, when we asked participants about their customer experiences while wearing masks, we found that functional aspects of the experiences were also affected. Just under three in ten (28%) customers said that wearing a mask prevented them from, or made it harder, to achieve what they wanted, while over four in ten (43%) reported at least some detriment to their trip as a result of wearing a mask.

A significant proportion of people are therefore in greater need of support in order to achieve their goals.

Among those who experienced some detriment to their trip, either down to customer and/or staff members wearing masks, difficulties were highlighted in three key areas:

- **Communication:** intuitively, given face masks block lip reading (and potentially muffle voices), hearing and understanding are rendered more difficult by masks. More than half (54%) of participants said they could not hear the staff member, or the staff member could not hear them. Over two-fifths (44%) of participants reported that staff could not understand them, or that they could not understand the staff member.
- **Physical comfort:** about two-fifths (42%) said they felt physically uncomfortable wearing a mask so cut their trip short, or that the staff member appeared uncomfortable.
- **Enjoyment:** almost two-fifths (38%) reported that they enjoyed their trip less. Doubtless this can partly be attributed to the difficulties described here.

**Figure 2** Impact of wearing a mask (% selecting each)



All respondents who experienced some detriment to their trip as a result of wearing a mask or staff wearing a mask (126)

Source: Center for Applied Research in Decision Making at Temple University/Ipsos R&D

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BUSINESSES?

Mask wearing is likely here to stay, and for some considerable time yet. But, given the impact that face masks can have on the quality and effectiveness of interactions between individuals, organisations need to go to extra lengths to counter that impact.

In the same research, we asked participants who experienced some detriment to their trip what interventions they would like to see. Enhanced communication is key:

- Over two-fifths of participants (43%) want staff to speak more loudly – doubtless mask related.
- A quarter want more signs or posters on site telling them what to do – an indicator that customers are keen to follow health and safety guidelines, but that guiding information needs to be clearly visible.

**Figure 3** Which of the following would have made it easier to achieve what you wanted to do? (% selecting each)



All respondents who experienced some detriment to their trip as a result of wearing a mask or staff wearing a mask (126)

Source: Center for Applied Research in Decision Making at Temple University/Ipsos R&D

These learnings can help inform action plans, including training initiatives for employees. Here are some key aspects that need to be clearly communicated and actioned within organisations as important ways to facilitate interactions between employees and customers:



### **BODY LANGUAGE**

Where appropriate it is recommended to try and help communication with relevant and engaging gestures.



### **IMPORTANCE OF EYE CONTACT**

Eyes can convey a lot of information and making use of the appropriate amount/form of eye contact is a way to enhance communication.



### **VOICE/SOUND**

Speaking more slowly, and in some cases more loudly, will help. Managing the level of noise, including how loud music is played, is important too.



### **ENVIRONMENT**

Visual aids, such as posters and interactive devices, are ways to provide the customer with relevant information, and also to guide them through the experience and help them achieve what they came in to achieve.

But there is no magic solution here, and individual businesses need to measure the impact of health and safety regulations on their customers' and employees' experiences, across their specific touchpoints, in order to mitigate any negative effect. New and sustainable experiences need to be designed that are fully in-line with regulations, but that also foster strong customer relationships.



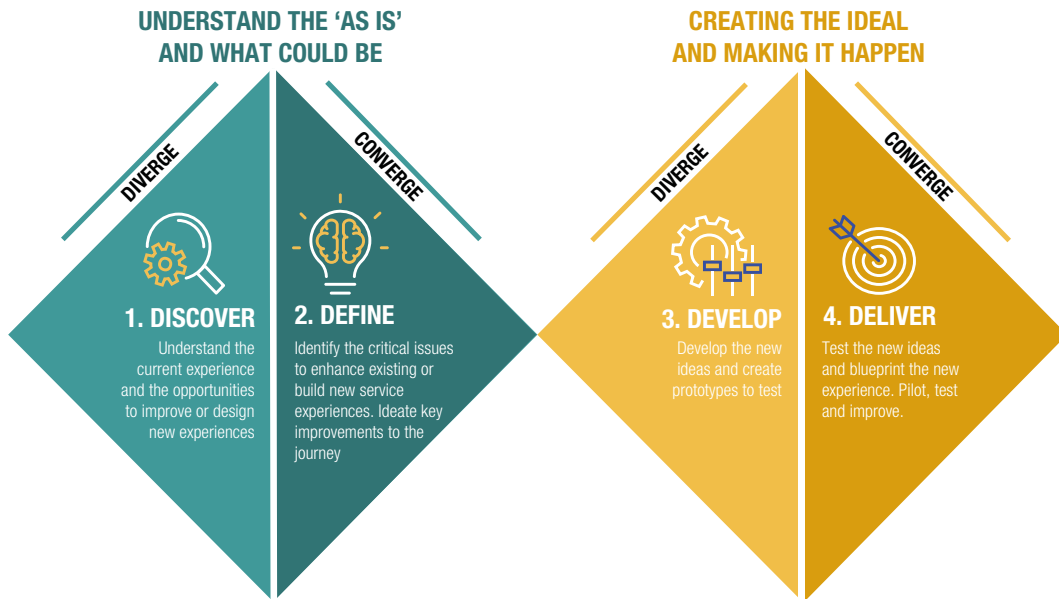


# CX SERVICE DESIGN

Brands can understand and evaluate the experience they are delivering, and improvements/enhancements required, using a CX Service Design approach. Ipsos' CX Service Design

framework uses a four-stage approach, which starts with understanding the experience, through to designing new interventions that will positively impact customer experience.

**Figure 4** Ipsos' CX Service Design framework





## STEP 1: DISCOVER

At the first stage, we will understand from existing data and knowledge, for example Voice of the Customer programmes and other listening data, combined with stakeholder and front-line perspectives, how the current experience is delivered, the brand promise intention behind it, and what potential interventions there are to improve the experience, from an internal perspective.

Through research among customers, we will observe and explore the impact of face masks and deliver an empathetic understanding. We will unpick customers' needs, motivations, pain points and key moments of truth.

## STEP 2: DEFINE

Having understood the experience delivered, from the internal, front-line and customer perspective, stage two is concerned with creating solutions and interventions, based on that understanding, which will build and improve the relationships with customers. Our research into face masks shows that communication and empathy are key areas to address. However, the extent of the problem and impact will vary by organisation and touchpoint, therefore our approach pinpoints the most suitable interventions given context and business model.

## STEP 3: DEVELOP

Working together with our clients, we will create the prototypes to test interventions with the front-line and customer and measure the impact on their experience. In some cases, interventions will be ready for launch without further testing and interrogation, as they will make immediate and intuitive common sense. Others may need further and deeper exploration through concept evaluation research.

## STEP 4: DELIVER

Soft launching selected interventions, with A/B, or test vs. control designs, is common. Once fully launched, the new interventions are then monitored through ongoing measurement programmes, and adjusted further, if required.



## CONCLUSION

There is nothing more important than protecting the health and safety of staff and customers, and masks play an important role in this. Notwithstanding, our research shows that face masks have the potential to have a significant negative impact on an organisation's abilities to build strong customer relationships.

To mitigate, service design that goes beyond traditional problem diagnosis and prioritisation, to generate ideas for potential interventions or new processes, is key. This begins with a thorough understanding of customers' needs and

ends with a flexible and iterative approach to service design in order to deliver great customer experiences that deliver on brand promises and on desired business outcomes.

In addition to overcoming the challenges of mask wearing, implementing the right actions is an opportunity for organisations to stand out, to be perceived as innovative and relevant, and this can create goodwill and positive perceptions in the long run.



## REFERENCES

1. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/axios-ipsos-coronavirus-index>
2. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/news-polls/Four-in-Five-Canadians-Will-Not-Shop-at-Stores-Deemed-Unsafe>
3. Haxby, J.V., Hoffman, E.A. and Gobbini, M.I. (2002). Human neural systems for face recognition and human communication. *Society of Biological Psychiatry*
4. McGurk, H. and MacDonald, J. (1976). Hearing lips and seeing voices. *Nature* 264, 746–748. doi: 10.1038/264746a0
5. Williams, C.W., Haroon, E., Mai, B. and Venkatraman, V. (In preparation) Face masks influence how facial expressions are perceived: A drift-diffusion model of emotion judgments
6. A total of 290 participants were recruited in the United States to rate 324 faces representing six discrete affective responses, namely angry, fearful, disgusted, happy, sad and surprised, across three conditions: no masking, masking of the bottom half of the face (mimicking a face mask) and masking of the top half of the face. To ensure we controlled for ethnic and racial diversity, we chose images from the RADIATE Face Set that were balanced for Asian, Black, Hispanic and White. In addition to rating faces, participants were also asked about their experience as customers during the pandemic, focused on the impact of face masks. This fieldwork was carried out 12-13 October 2020.

## FURTHER READING

- Getting Sticky – Emotional attachment and profitable customer relationships  
<https://www.ipsos.com/en/emotional-attachment-and-profitable-customer-relationships>
- Get Fair or Fail – Why fairness is key to business success  
<https://www.ipsos.com/en/get-fair-or-fail-why-fairness-key-business-success>
- Mind the Gap – Why what a brand promises and what it delivers matter  
<https://www.ipsos.com/en/mind-gap-why-what-brand-promises-and-what-it-delivers-matter>
- Money Talks or Budget Walks – Delivering a Return on Customer Experience Investment: ROCXI  
<https://www.ipsos.com/en/money-talks-or-budget-walks>
- Staying Close to your Customers – Why customer experience still matters amid COVID-19 and social distancing  
<https://www.ipsos.com/en/staying-close-your-customers>
- The Forces of Customer Experience – The science of strong relationships in challenging times  
<https://www.ipsos.com/en/forces-customer-experience>

## LISTENING

- Customer Perspective: An Ipsos podcast  
<https://www.ipsos.com/en/customer-perspective-ipsos-podcast>

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