

BRIEF

96% of restaurants require staff to wear masks

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Dive Brief:

- Two out of three restaurant operators believe the restaurant environment will get worse in the next three months, according to data released July 17 from Black Box Intelligence. This comes as comp sales declined by nearly 2% in the week ending July 5.
- Safety is the top priority for operators, with 96% of them requiring masks for all restaurant staff, according to a poll of almost 300 operators. A majority of operators are also implementing social distancing by removing select tables (86%), taking employees' temperatures before shifts (77%), requiring gloves for all staff (71%) and adding plexiglass barriers (57%).
- Safety is also a top priority for customers. Net sentiment for "clean" improved by nearly 20 percentage points from April to June, according to the data.

Dive Insight:

It may be too early to gauge whether or not extensive safety protocols are resonating with anxious consumers to the point where they yield sales increases. Though many major operators are adding features like plexiglass barriers, for example, dine-in sales at full-service restaurants are trending down again in favor for off-premise business, according to Black Box Intelligence.

Still, these added measures have the potential to lure wary customers back. Seventy percent of diners expect thorough and frequent cleaning at restaurants, and 63% want to see cleaning safety measures posted in stores, according to a May survey conducted by P&G Professional.

"Safety beats everything right now," Jack Li, Datassential's CEO, said during a Restaurants Rise keynote facilitated by Nation's Restaurant News.

This is why chains are investing heavily in safety and sanitation. Last week, Starbucks began requiring its customers to wear masks inside its stores, a move supported by a majority of Americans, according to survey by The Harris Poll reported by Business Insider. Meanwhile, Dunkin' joined the P&G Professional CleanPLUS Experience Program to ensure restaurants are cleaned from top to bottom. McDonald's released its reopening protocols in May, covering everything from touchless sinks to pulls that allow customers to open bathroom doors with their feet.

Such efforts aren't cheap, which is an added challenge as sales are down, particularly for independents. During Darden Restaurant's Q4 earnings call in late June, executives noted that the company incurred over \$5 million in incremental cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment related to COVID-19. Other chains are dedicating entire positions to keep restaurants safe and clean. Denny's, for example, is adding sanitation specialists, while Cava added a cleaning concierge to each restaurant.

Darden CEO Gene Lee said during his company's earnings call that his team is focused on what they can control, citing physical barriers and other safety measures, as well as a sharper focus on off-premise.

"We still don't know how we can get back to a normal environment ... whether it's going to stay 100% curbside or people are going to want to come in. We've got to really go through that discovery process," he said.

For restaurants, the challenge right now is that while customers claim they will feel more comfortable dining out when extensive safety measures are put into place, they're not necessarily rushing back to restaurants. The Harris Poll, which surveyed 3,000 Americans between June 26 and 29, found that 60% are not ready to start dining out, per Business Insider.

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