

Yellers, Complainers, Chin-Maskers, and People Who Explode on You

The Hazards of Working in a Grocery Store during the Pandemic

Andrew Warren

BEFORE YOU READ: Have you ever had a job where people “exploded on you”? Describe it.

Hazardous Work in the Grocery Store

These are tough times for grocery store workers! We have to do our regular jobs *and* try to enforce the store’s rules to keep everyone safe during the pandemic. This is harder than you think, especially since it turns out everyone has their own personal belief system about what is safe and what isn’t. In addition, people are afraid, and their fears come out in weird ways – like yelling at grocery store employees.

Yellers and Complainers

At our store, we put blue tape on the floor, six feet apart, so customers could keep social distance while waiting in line. One time, I had to ask a gentleman to stand back behind the blue line and wait for his turn. He slammed his stuff back in his cart yelling: “I’M OVER SIX FEET!” My front-end manager came and told him the exact same thing. The man was upset. He thought we were taking away his right to stand wherever he wanted. My manager explained to him about social distancing and Covid safety. The man just got more upset and said I should be fired. My manager refused to do that and threatened to kick him out of the store. The gentleman did not say another word after that. I bagged his groceries and he left. His behavior made me feel uncomfortable. It took me a whole day to feel less stressed about the incident.

Another day, I had cart cleaning duty. I was cleaning one cart at a time, from the handle, to the baby seat, and even the sides of the carts too. I was cleaning them exactly how I was trained to



A supermarket checker works behind a plastic shield in a dangerous place. Photo by Russ Allison Loar: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/>.

clean them when a rude customer came along and told me to clean the carts over again. I explained to him that I had already cleaned them. The customer yelled, “THIS IS NOT CLEAN! YOU ARE NOT DOING YOUR JOB RIGHT! DO YOUR JOB RIGHT!”

An elderly lady who was in the check-out line backed me up. She said to him, “Sir, he is doing the best he can to get these carts clean! You need to appreciate what he is doing and stop being so selfish!”

The customer went up to the manager with his clean cart and told him how he thought the carts should be cleaned. When my manager explained how we were trained to clean the carts, the customer refused to listen. Instead, he went on a racist rant and said he wished the grocery store workers would “speak English!” My front-end manager refused to listen to him and told the customer to leave. I was upset about what happened. I didn’t like how he treated me or my colleagues.

Chin-Maskers

In addition to the yellers, the complainers, and the people who tell us how to do our jobs, there are the chin-maskers. One time, a customer walked into the store with his mask neatly covering his chin. I asked the chin-masker to pull up his mask.

The chin-masker said to me, “I don’t have to.”

I said to the chin-masker, “Our store policy is that everyone has to wear a mask properly.”

He responded to me, “It’s my right not to wear one. There is NO law for that.”

“Well,” I said, “It is our right to have this rule in place, and I’m going to get a manager to sort this out.”

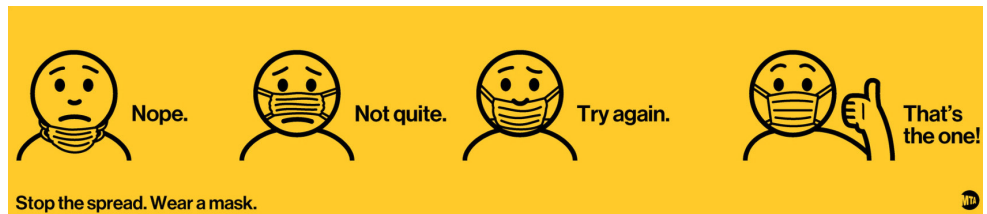


Photo from the New York City subway. Used under the Creative Commons license from the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA): <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mtaphotos/>.

The store manager said to the chin-masker, “You’ve got to wear your mask over your nose and mouth in my store. It is my right to kick you out of the store if you don’t wear one properly.”

The chin-masker dropped his basket, ripped down the mask rule sign that was on the door, and stormed out of the store.

I wish people would understand that the rules are made to keep everyone safe, not to infringe on personal freedoms.

We Are Trying to Keep Everyone Safe

Our job during a pandemic was hard enough. Sometimes, the people we were trying to serve were making us feel worse. I wish people would understand that the rules are made to keep everyone safe, not to infringe on personal freedoms. People should stop being selfish. They could be protecting others instead of harming them. Germs aren’t the only thing that harm people. Words harm people, too. These angry people caused me a lot of stress. It’s not worth sacrificing my own health trying to deal with their anger, so I work hard to not take it personally.

Andrew Warren has been a student in the ASE class at the Methuen Adult Learning Center in Massachusetts for the past three years. This spring he passed his first HSE exam in Social Studies. He has worked at the grocery store for 7 years.



Take It Further

According to the author, what are the hazards of working in a grocery store during the pandemic? Be specific.

What are some of the strategies the writer uses at his workplace to deal with difficult customers?

What do you think about the rules for Covid safety at your workplace? Write about what they are and whether they are working.