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The Role of Emotions in Masked Service Encounters

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A smile alone does not guarantee excellent customer service, but excellent customer service almost always starts with a smile. However, face mask obligations in nearly all service interactions all around the world cover around 60-70% of the face area during COVID-19, and this newly covered face area is crucial for facial emotional reading, including friendly smile detection. Results from two online studies and one field study indicate that most customers can decode employee smiles even when covered with a face mask. If employees express a neutral or negative emotion, mask-wearing covers the unfavorable emotions and, thus, increases perceived warmth. This effect can be mitigated by wearing smiling masks. Smiling masks increase perceived warmth, leading to higher customer inspiration through a serial mediation with rapport, and finally end up in more successful service evaluations (i.e., higher customer satisfaction, more positive word-of-mouth communication, and higher average ticket sizes). These findings enrich our understanding of face masks in service encounters. We extend the literature on emotional services and show that emotional contagion may occur through artificially created facial expressions (i.e., a smile printed on a mask). Furthermore, we recommend that managers empower their employees to display friendly smiles, even under masks.