

Masks are given out at casinos now. We checked to see who's wearing them.

By Bailey Schulz and Richard N. Velotta Las Vegas Review-Journal
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All across the Las Vegas Valley, hotel-casinos were dealing out more than just chips and cards this week. There was also an abundance of complimentary face masks, one of the many changes seen in a post-COVID-19 Las Vegas.

Despite the availability of face coverings, Review-Journal staff and experts who toured casinos on Thursday and Friday said only about half of visitors were seen wearing masks. Others chose to ignore social distancing rules, despite reminders placed throughout properties.

“We can educate (visitors) on the benefits of wearing a mask,” Gov. Steve Sisolak told the Review-Journal on Friday. “(Casinos) encourage their guests to, they provide them to the guests if they don’t have them with them, and I think that’s the best that we can do.”

‘A pretty good start’

Sisolak said at least half of the visitors he saw when touring casinos on Friday had masks on.

“I’m pretty proud of that. I think that’s a pretty good start,” he said, speaking behind a mask of his own.

Sisolak said a face covering can make “a big, big difference,” but he doesn’t believe casinos should force customers to wear them in order to enter the building.

“I don’t want to have guests coming in here to have a good time and mandate that we wear a mask,” Sisolak said. “A lot of these folks are coming from other areas where they don’t encourage masks as much as we do. So there’s an education process involved here, and we’re encouraging folks to do that.”

Nevada Gaming Control Board chairwoman Sandra Morgan agreed, and said it wouldn’t make sense to require every guest to wear a mask — especially those that have certain medical issues.

“Strongly encouraging people to wear a mask and making them available is definitely something that we can do, and we’ve done responsibly,” she said.

Social distancing and the use of facial coverings varied from casino to casino in the two days since they reopened.

At Caesars Palace, reporters observed about a 50-50 split of mask wearers and non-wearers.

Most of the players at the table games in the Palace Casino near the main entrance wore masks while playing. But a majority of slot-machine players did not cover up.

Social distancing also was spotty.

Caesars' front-desk lobby was well marked and there was signage throughout the property asking people to observe social distancing.

But in hotel elevators, where there's signage and the floors are marked asking that each car hold just four passengers, the suggestions were ignored. There were no Caesars employees managing the elevators.

There was similar signage at the parking garage elevators and the company added floor signs after Thursday's opening. But customers ignored the advice.

Enforcement at casinos

Caesars Entertainment Corp. spokesman Richard Broome said the company requires staff and guests at table games to wear masks, and has them available to guests. There is also "ample signage" around properties that encourage mask-wearing.

According to requirements laid out by the Nevada Gaming Control Board, gaming licensees must have face coverings available for patrons and guests, and encourage them to wear face coverings while in public places on property.

While the Control Board doesn't require casino employees to wear face masks, many casino operators have added that stipulation themselves.

But social distancing is more of a choice.

"Enforcement of social distancing rules will be achieved by a combination of visual cues, employee encouragement and self-policing by guests and employees," Broome said in an email.

All staff at Wynn Resorts Ltd.'s Las Vegas properties, including retail employees, wear face coverings at work.

Wynn spokesman Michael Weaver said about half of its guests so far have chosen to wear a mask, and more are doing so when walking through a public area.

“When they are in their own social group at a dining table, already physically distanced from other guests, most do not,” he said.

On Thursday, MGM President and Acting CEO Bill Hornbuckle said face masks are “essential” to keep staff and guests alike safe.

“We encourage our customers to wear them, and hopefully they will,” he said.

MGM spokeswoman Callie Driehorst added that the company makes masks readily available and complimentary throughout properties.

“We are encouraged by guests’ response so far (on) our health and safety plan,” she said via email.

David Strow, spokesman for Boyd Gaming Corp., said the company is pleased so far with how many customers are taking masks seriously.

“While we don’t have exact figures, a good portion of our customers understand the importance of wearing face coverings in public settings, and have been wearing masks while they are with us,” he said. “Wearing a face covering is mandatory for our team members, and it is strongly encouraged for all customers.”

A Station Casinos spokesperson said “many” of its guests are wearing face masks, and its properties provide complimentary masks and encourage their use among guests.

Keith Salwoski, spokesman for The Venetian, said all staff members must wear FDA-approved masks, and the company encourages guests to wear masks by providing complimentary masks in personal amenity kits, at thermal screening stations and in the casino.

Personal freedoms

While major U.S. airlines are forcing customers to wear masks, few other industries are requiring their use.

Josh Swissman, founding partner of Las Vegas gaming and hospitality consulting firm The Strategy Organization, agreed that casinos are better off allowing customers the ability to choose whether or not to cover their faces.

“Las Vegas is a town of individualism, and people enjoy themselves in Vegas in a number of different ways,” he said. “This is just an extension of that freedom that the town and these operators provide.”

He added that certain activities casinos offer — including eating, drinking and smoking — are not compatible with face masks.

Brendan Bussmann of Global Market Advisors agreed, and said casinos are keeping guests’ comfort in mind.

“It all goes to individuality and what people feel comfortable with,” he said.

Las Vegas-based Union Gaming analyst John Decree said it appeared visitors in both local and Strip casinos were OK with the new protocols.

“I think everyone had expectations there would be increased safety and hygiene in place, so no one was surprised,” he said.

He saw more customers wearing personal protective equipment on the Strip compared to local properties, but said that could be a product of the Strip having more visitors from California, who “have experienced more cases and restrictions back home than we did here in Nevada.”

Kearney, Nebraska resident Josh Jorgensen, who traveled to the Bellagio with his wife Thursday to celebrate their anniversary, said he saw about half of the guests wearing masks on Thursday — although he saw fewer were doing so on the casino floor.

He didn’t wear a mask his entire time on the property, but he did make sure to grab one from one of the property’s mask stations after leaving the pool.

“I wear it when I feel like I should,” he said. “The staff here, they’re taking it seriously, and they’re doing an excellent job making sure that ... masks are available whenever you need it.”

Vikki Leach, who traveled from Los Angeles to stay at Bellagio opening day, said she’s seen more people wearing a mask than not.

Others “don’t even have them around their neck,” she said. But “it’s very few.”

While some visitors’ response to masks seems nonchalant, it’s unlikely this group of travelers represents the mindset of the general American population,

according to Brian Labus, an assistant professor in epidemiology and biostatistics at UNLV and a member of the medical team advising Sisolak.

“You’ll see a lot of lax attitudes about this among tourists,” he said. “The people are less concerned about the virus. ... They’re willing to travel with people in the middle of an outbreak.”

An altruistic gesture

Labus believes masks are an important tool to curb the spread of COVID-19.

They help reduce transmission of the virus from one person to another, and are especially useful among carriers who don’t show symptoms, he said. Various studies — including one from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — have found that somewhere between 35 to 50 percent of those carrying the virus are asymptomatic.

“We know that asymptomatic people who don’t cough can still spread the disease,” Labus said. “The masks are a simple and important piece of all our efforts to mitigate the risks of bringing people together.”

Even those who do become symptomatic go through a period without symptoms where they can unknowingly spread the virus, Labus said. This period usually lasts a day or two.

While wearing a mask won’t protect the user from getting the virus, it does protect those around them.

“Think of wearing a mask like covering your mouth, like when you sneeze or cough, but you’re doing it all the time,” he said. “It doesn’t do anything to protect you — it’s an altruistic gesture. We need everybody to do this.”

Labus suggested people wear masks when out and about, even if there is social distancing or other safety measures in place.

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Contact Bailey Schulz at bschulz@reviewjournal.com or 702-383-0233. Follow @bailey_schulz on Twitter. Contact Richard N. Velotta at rvelotta@reviewjournal.com or 702-477-3893. Follow @RickVelotta on Twitter. Review-Journal staff writer Eli Segall contributed to this report.