

A missing piece of the consumer puzzle

By Brock Weir

Patience has never been one of my strongest virtues.

I freely admit it. There were few things more aggravating in my mind than a 'hurry up and wait' situation.

Note the use of past tense. A global pandemic changes many things.

Yet, here I am, back from a weekend that necessitated three trips into Toronto. Whether it was to catch up with people I hadn't seen since a month before COVID-19 ushered in our first lockdown, check a few long-standing errands off a list that has become rather dusty through the passage of time, or visit a few attractions that have long piqued my interest, I relished the chance to hurry up and wait.

If you told me 18, 19, 20 months ago that I would welcome standing in a line, I would have, depending on my mood, either rolled my eyes or laughed. Now such lines, at least in my view, are a great confidence booster.

A line-up was once an inconvenience, especially if you were pressed for time, but now it is a sign that whatever business, service, restaurant or attraction you're looking to patronize is taking what is hoped to be the tail end of a pandemic ? and the health of its staff and patrons ? seriously.

Given my recent experiences in the city, however, not all businesses, services, restaurants and attractions are cut from the same cloth. While most had staff members in place to check vaccination status, whether through the Province's new app or the trusty hard-copy certificate handed out at the point of inoculation, some either didn't care or didn't have the resources to do so. Or, in at least one instance, had the resources but had to be prompted to jump into action.

The businesses and services that don't have the resources to be as vigilant as they could be can't be blamed for being comparatively lax with the rules. A lot is being asked of them above and beyond the extremely difficult times they have faced throughout the pandemic and having to pump in scarce resources to implement Provincial rules with little assistance from Queen's Park is yet another stressor.

The businesses that just don't care? Well, I suspect this lack of effort will also hit their bottom line.

On Thanksgiving, for instance, I was in Orillia to visit family. With some time to spare before the culinary mayhem was set to begin, we took a trip up bustling Mississauga Street to see how local businesses were faring. Some didn't survive COVID-19, judging by some of the recently empty storefronts, while others bravely forged ahead to open up new businesses and fulfil their dreams. Yet, one business, one which had many tantalizing offerings in their window, lost ours when one member of our group of four pointed out a sign in their door essentially stating they didn't care one way or another if you came in vaccinated or not, masked or not.

Such business, unfortunately, was taken elsewhere.

So, while in pre-pandemic times, a line-up might make me look elsewhere purely out of the interests of time, this has been well and truly flipped. Want me to wait an extra five or ten minutes for a patron or two to leave before I can come in and maintain social distance? Perfect!

But we're now getting a vague timeline on when these lines, capacity limits, and the requirement to prove your vaccination status might too be a thing of the past.

On Friday, the Government of Ontario set out its long-term plan for easing us out of COVID measures, so long as trends continue in a positive direction.

Capacity limits in many settings, including restaurants and gyms, were lifted Monday. The next step is slated to come on November 15 with higher-risk settings like nightclubs seeing their capacity limits lifted as long as proof of vaccination is required.

After that, we have a bit of a wait.

As long as people follow their good common sense over the holiday season and we don't see a spike of new cases in schools or the community at large in the two weeks after the dawn of 2022, capacity limits in places where proof of vaccination is not currently required will be lifted ? with the lifting of proof of vaccination requirements in high-risk settings set for February 7.

As for masks in indoor public settings? We might be able to finally hang them up by March 28.

Again, as long as common sense is followed and numbers don't spike.

?We are now in a position where we can see the proposed plan for lifting the remaining public health and workplace safety measures in Ontario,? said Dr. Kieran Moore, Chief Medical Officer of Health on Friday. ?The months ahead will require continued vigilance, as we don't want to cause anymore unnecessary disruption to people's everyday lives. We must continue to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 in our communities by following the public health measures in place and by vaccinating those who have not yet received their shots. Ontario has the infrastructure in place to manage outbreaks, including a high-volume capacity for testing, and people to perform fast and effective case and contact management when needed.?

Ontario also has the resources to further support businesses of all kinds as we ease out of what has become our new normal and while these establishments were largely left to themselves in implementing social distancing, mask rules, and proof of vaccination requirements, it is necessary for them to receive the supports they need to handle this transition as well.

While we will all welcome the time we can go into most places without our masks on, it might take some time for people to feel comfortable in doing so.

Supporting consumer confidence is, at this time, a missing piece of the puzzle.