



# ≡ BC RESTAURANT AND FOODSERVICES ASSOCIATION VACCINE CARD PROGRAM: TACKLING CHALLENGES FACED BY OPERATORS



The British Columbia Restaurant and Foodservices Association is a dedicated resource to help restaurateurs grow and succeed in business in our province.

Much of operating a restaurant is built on creativity and optimism. COVID-19 has brought a lot of extra stress and frustration into our places of connection and community. The pandemic response requires that operators follow new protocols and health and safety regulations to keep staff and guests safe. However, to do this, our front-of-house people have taken the brunt of some angry or frustrated customers. The prospect of having these great ambassadors deal with more angry guests wanting to prove a point about the passports is frustrating.

We have worked with a range of operators to come up with some ideas and suggestions for tackling this next phase of the COVID-19 response.

## THINGS TO REMEMBER WITH THE VACCINE CARD PROGRAM/PUBLIC HEALTH ORDER:

- The Provincial Health Officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry and her team, are charged with the determination of what is needed to reduce the spread of COVID-19 because it is a significant communicable disease.
- Businesses are required by law to follow this Public Health Order, if they fall under the business types listed.
- The order is provided under section 52 (2) of the Public Health Act which covers transmission of communicable diseases, in this case COVID-19.
- While restaurants are not a significant source of COVID-19 transmission, they are a place of gathering inside with people of multiple households and the Provincial Health Officer has determined that there is a risk of spread in these situations.

- Licensed premises must follow this order because the Provincial Health Officer has determined that social mingling coupled with the consumption of alcohol leads to increased risky behaviours and is associated with increased transmission of COVID-19.
- The program is in place to help keep businesses open with reduced risk of transmission: keeping businesses open provides operators stability, the ability plan and works to provide a safer environment for customers/staff.

## WHAT IS INVOLVED IN CHECKING THE VACCINE CARD?

- Someone on your team has to check vaccine cards, plus photo ID for people over 19, before an order for sit-down service is taken. Vaccination verification does not have to be before they enter the business.
- The Vaccine Card and the ID can be checked using the Vaccine Verifier App OR a simple visual check. There is no requirement to use a QR code scanner or to incur the costs of buying one.

## SOME CUSTOMERS MAY EXPRESS CONCERN THAT THE VACCINE CARD PROGRAM VIOLATES THEIR RIGHTS. THEY MAY SAY THINGS LIKE: *'You can't impose this on me'* or *'This is a violation of my human rights'*.

*A customer's rights have never been absolute.* You could actually refuse customers service before COVID-times. In this case, because COVID-19 poses a significant health and safety risk, the Provincial Health Officer has enacted this program to reduce the spread of the infectious disease COVID-19 for the public good. Businesses are required to follow the public health order and face fines for non-compliance. Further, the Vaccine Card program has been vetted through the BC Privacy Commissioner. They determined that the customer's privacy is being adequately maintained.

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## The customer has options:

- They can get take out from your business.
- They can support another neighbourhood business that doesn't offer table service or have a liquor license.
- They and their doctor can apply for a medical exemption.

**What they can't do without a vaccine card and ID:** come in to dine with you.

## WHAT IF MY STAFF ARE SCARED OF FACING DIFFICULT CUSTOMERS?

Employees should be given frequent options to raise any incidents that concern them. If questions arise that you can't answer, call 604.669.2239 and our BCRFA staff will try to find answers for you. If you have repeated situations, it might be helpful to call your Mayor and MLA and have them request support for education and outreach in your region. We can help make these connections if needed.

If anyone feels their safety is in jeopardy, reach out to police and dial 911 in emergencies.

We suggest that if you have a single incident, that you debrief with your full team on how to handle a similar situation in the future so that everyone on the team builds confidence around your response. In this debrief session, discuss with your team how likely they feel the situation is to reoccur.

If you determine that you have a large number of difficult customers, we suggest you formalize an alternative way to provide services for them. Consider whether it would help your team to implement the COVID Safety Plan protocols of distance between guests and different lines for take out and dine in.

## IS THERE A PROACTIVE MESSAGE I CAN POST ON MY CHANNELS TO PREPARE MY GUESTS?

We have come up with a couple statements we think you can use to prepare your guests. You don't have to pretend you love these news rules, you just have to follow them. Make sure you use a style of writing that connects with your customers so that they are receptive to your message.

*"We serve meals to great people in our community everyday. We thank our customers for coming in and supporting us for the past 18 months of changing pandemic regulations. If you haven't been by in a while, please have your vaccine card and ID ready when you arrive. It's fast and it reduces the spread of COVID-19."*

OR

*"The Provincial Health Officer has required our business to check Vaccine Cards for guests 12 and up, and ID for guests 19 and up. We want to make this easy for you: please have your vaccine card and ID ready so we can get you in and dining quickly."*

OR

*"Another COVID curveball – yup, vaccine cards. Don't love 'em but have to check 'em. It's another step towards getting business back to normal. When you come in to dine in or on our patio, have your vaccine card (12+) and photo ID (19+) ready. Once we've checked, come in and enjoy a meal with us with confidence."*

OR

*"We still hate COVID and we know you do too. Dining inside or on our patio now requires that we check your vaccine card (12+) and ID (19+). We don't love it but to keep you and our staff safe, we're following all public health orders. Help us make it easy by having them ready when you arrive."*

## I'M GETTING FAKE RESERVATIONS, WHAT DO I DO?

This is ridiculous and we hate it but there is an easy solution.

1. If you take reservations online, make customers put a \$10/\$25 per person deposit on the reservation. If you take reservations by phone, take and run the guests credit card for a minimum amount – no less than \$25 – so that it is enough to be a deterrent.
2. Deduct this deposit from their final bill when they pay for their meal. This builds confidence in real guests and deters others.

If guests are concerned about the deposit, explain why you are putting it in place. Customers have had very positive responses to this strategy.

## I'M GETTING FAKE TAKE OUT ORDERS, WHAT DO I DO?

This is incredibly frustrating and juvenile. Some restaurants are definitely being targeted by fake orders – thankfully, we are hearing more rumours about this than actual situations. If this is something you are concerned about, the solution is to charge for take out when it is ordered.

Online orders can be charged when ordered – you can also take credit card over the phone for full payment of take out orders. If processing over the phone is difficult, you can choose to only take orders to go at a counter in your business.

## MY BUSINESS HAS BEEN SUBJECT TO TROLLS CREATING FAKE OR NASTY REVIEWS ON DINING SITES AND/OR SOCIAL MEDIA. WHAT DO I DO?

**Managing your social media channels at this time is super challenging. A few steps:**

1. Managing your online presence is marketing in the current era. Make sure you are only on channels that you are actively monitoring. Take the time now to reduce the number of channels you are posting on. Close accounts you aren't using anymore.
2. Know what people are saying. Set up a daily Google Alert email to show when people have mentioned you online.
3. Spend 10 minutes checking reviews every day. Customers who complain to a brand online want a response within an hour, so the quicker, the better.
4. Reply to bad reviews. If you leave a bad review unanswered, it shows other readers you don't care that much, and it will give them more reason to believe the bad review.
  - If it is a silly complaint, there may be nothing to fix. But make sure you are seen as paying attention and considering all the feedback you get.
  - If it is an example of actual bad service or bad food, apologize and offer a free drink or appetizer voucher to encourage them to give your business another chance.
  - If the complaint doesn't match your model, let's say someone complains your food is too simple, you can say: "We're sorry your experience didn't meet your

expectations. We provide wholesome, food for the soul. It's not fine dining, but it's homey and tasty." That's bound to be a selling point for someone else.

- Remember, returning customers spend more money than new customers.
5. In the case of fake reviews, don't think you are responding to the complainer, respond to the customers who want to see you triumph over those trolls! More below.

## IF I'M BEING ATTACKED ONLINE, IS IT WORTH RESPONDING AT ALL?

Some people are downright mean and may be taking out their frustrations on your restaurant. We suggest you harness the negative reviews to attract like minded-customers. Remember 88.7% of British Columbians are single vaxxed and 80% of all Canadians are double vaxxed. Speak to these folks and bring them back into your business.

All negative reviews aren't always bad reviews. Don't get defensive or get in the face of the trolls. Be transparent about what is happening. **Respond to troll posts with a positive message like:**

*"We are a local business that provides great meals and employs great people in Mission, BC. We are seeing a lot of reviews from people unhappy about our following Public Health Orders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are proud of our team and we want to keep our guests and staff safe. If you don't want to come in and show your vaccine card and ID, we hope you will support another local business in our community. We are proud of our staff and all the work they have done to pivot in these crazy times."*

OR

*"We are a small business in Hope, BC. We pride ourselves on providing delicious meals and great hospitality. Our staff are everything to us as they have helped us through this pandemic and all the ups and downs. If you are unhappy about the vaccine card, remember that our staff are working hard to serve you great meals not debate government regulations. If you choose not to come in right now, please support another local business in our community."*



OR

*“We serve our customers with the highest standard meals and service. If you have come in and had a bad experience, we will work to fix it for you. If you haven’t come in but are sharing your feedback because you are upset about Public Health Orders, please don’t take it out on our staff. Our staff are everything to this local business. We are proud of them and we want to look after them.”*

OR

*“It’s our job to keep our business safe by following Public Health regulations. If you like great food and amazing people dedicated to working in your community, come out and support us by dining in or by getting take out. If you don’t like the public health orders, speak to your MLA or MP. We want to share a great dining experience – not a debate about health orders!”*

Other potential and current customers are looking at your comments as much as the bad reviews. You’ll make a much better impression if you can come back with a calm and reasoned response.

## WHAT DO I DO IF THE BAD REVIEWS ARE LEADING ME AND MY STAFF TO LOSE OUR MORALE?

It’s hard not to take a bad review personally. You can do a few things to reduce the stress.

1. Don’t be afraid to ban people from your accounts. Get rid of them and move on.
2. If one social channel (like Facebook) is really causing you grief, you can put the channel on hold and pin a post saying you are not currently using this channel because you have been receiving negative comments that aren’t related to your food or your service.
3. You can remove the ability for people to comment or review your business. This is a switch you can turn off for now and turn on again in the future. It doesn’t have to be a forever decision.
4. Be honest and share your story about what is happening for your business, why you are getting bad reviews and how you are feeling about it. Telling your staff and customers the truth will be point of connection for loyal customers.

By using this experience as an honest learning experience, you will create a better restaurant that will keep people coming back for more.

## MY STAFF IS EXHAUSTED. THIS IS THE LAST THING WE NEED, CAN WE AVOID DOING THE VACCINE CARD CHECKING?

No, if your business type appears in the Public Health Order, you must do this. You can’t change your business model to avoid checking vaccine passports. It doesn’t have to be terribly difficult. Start by checking ID and vaccine cards visually. You don’t need to download the verifier app. You can check at the table, at the counter or at the door.

If you think you have a larger group of customers that may be struggling with the health orders, you may want to check at the door and not let them inside your business. This may reduce stress on your staff.

Remember, you don’t have to let rude customers walk all over your staff. Instead, you need to take the high road. If someone is getting difficult, send over a second staff person to support the front line checker. Remind the customer of their option for getting take out or supporting another unlicensed business. You don’t want to come off like you’re making an excuse but this isn’t your program – you are required to check the vaccine cards and IDs. Encourage them to speak to their MLA or MP if necessary – try not to let your emotions take over.

We encourage you to call us and ask about the easiest way to implement it if you are really struggling: 604.669.2239.

### It’s challenging but we’re here to help!

The past 18 months, restaurants in BC have had to work through many changes to be resilient in face of this horrible virus. We know no one wants to put in place more rules, but we believe that the highly skilled, self-motivated, fast-on-our-feet workers that make BC hospitality truly outstanding are up to the challenge of getting us through to the end of this pandemic. Our restaurants are nothing without great employees.

Enforcing mask rules and vaccine cards are without a doubt the most frustrating part of the pandemic response for restaurants. It’s amazing how many people want to argue over wearing a mask or presenting a vaccine card. However, for every customer who fussed about wearing a mask or checking a passport, there are five who are showing kindness and extra generosity because they are glad to be dining out again with less COVID-worries.

**Reach out to us if you run into a road block, our office can be reached at 604.669.2239.**