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## Tipping Resentment Is Rampant: 'Why Am I Tipping for a Pair of Pliers?'

Checkout screens frequently suggest minimum tips, annoying 32% of Americans

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The Messenger.

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**J**ustin Stevens considers himself a good tipper, but lately he feels like that generosity is being stretched to its limit. Nowadays more and more fast-food chains and regular old stores ask him for a gratuity.

“Why am I tipping for a pair of pliers?” the 41-year-old Ohio doctor asked.

At more of the restaurant chains he frequents, the tipping screen on the checkout tablet automatically suggests a minimum 15% tip, even though there's no waitstaff.

“Unless I want to fuss with the ‘other tip amount’ option, I’m giving them a 15% tip for the privilege of doing everything I typically do for myself,” he said.

Many Americans are no doubt sharing his frustration. All anyone needs to do is relay one irritating experience and suddenly everyone around them has a story about unconventional places asking for arguably unreasonable tips.

But pressures to tip more exhaustively may have broader implications, too. We could be nearing a tipping point (pun intended) where gratuities are expected across such a broad swath of the economy that waiters, hairdressers, and other people who have long relied on them wind up getting smaller ones, according to industry insiders like Stephen Zagor, a consultant to the food industry, and Saru Jayaraman, president of an advocacy group for traditionally tipped workers.

In other words, if there isn't enough money to go around, workers who rely on tips for a significant share of their income stand to suffer the most.

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“I think there is some tipping fatigue,” said Jayaraman, citing conversations with restaurant wait staff represented by her organization, One Fair Wage. “Tipping is down and the younger generations tip less.”

Indeed, as more coffee houses, self-serve restaurants, corner stores and other retailers are asking customers to tack on an extra 15% to 25%, it can be hard to keep up. Some 66% of Americans have a negative view of tipping in general, 32% are [annoyed by those pre-entered tip screens](#), and 30% say the tipping culture has gotten out of control, according to a survey commissioned by Bankrate.com in May.

“I’m surprised that when I cross the street in New York someone doesn’t ask for a tip,” said Zagor, who is also an adjunct business professor at Columbia University.

## Why Tipping Changed

At the height of Covid-19 lockdowns, shoppers began tipping workers who risked their health and safety to stay on the job. Many of them hadn’t been tipped in the past and it stuck, experts say.

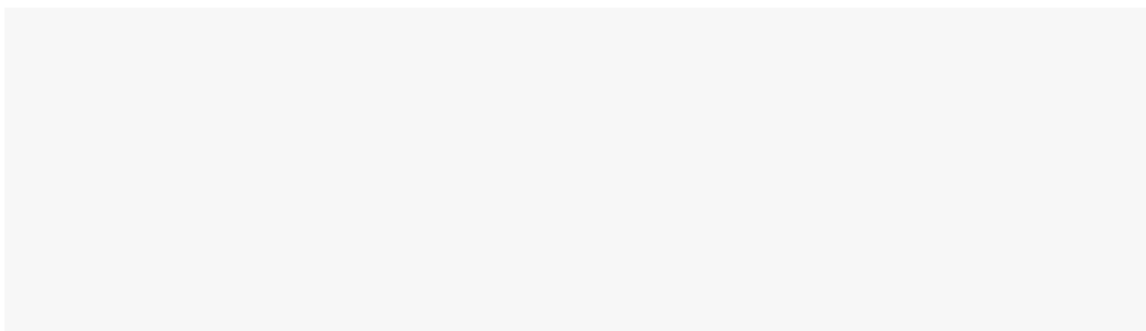
“In the pandemic it became combat pay,” Zagor said. “And it carried with it a heavier weight.”

That change coincided with the spread of the self-serve tablets many businesses now use for checkout. Instead of cashiers swiping or inserting the credit or debit card, the tablet has allowed customers to do it themselves, creating the perfect chance to request a gratuity.

If a merchant decides to ask for tips, a screen suggesting tip amounts appears once the card is approved. The “no tip” option is usually relegated to the bottom, where customers who may feel a bit bewildered by the whole experience aren’t always looking.

Sonic, the drive-through burger chain, reportedly [rolled out tip screens](#) in 2021 and Starbucks announced it would have them by [late 2022](#). Even some airport gift shops and self-serve [beer fridges](#) at major league ballparks have tip screens, according to a recent Wall Street Journal article.

“You respond to it intuitively,” said Kathleen Keeler, a management professor at Ohio State University who teaches about employee compensation and benefits and recently bristled at the tip screen she encountered when buying a smoothie. “Before you would actually have to have cash in hand and put it into a tip jar.”





The advent of self-serve digital tablets at checkout has created the perfect opportunity to ask for a tip. kali9/Getty Images

## The Potential Ripple Effects

To be sure, it's hard to determine whether there's any correlation between the advent of tipping prompts and other tipping behavior, let alone how well the prompts work. For example, twice as many people in Bankrate's survey said they were apt to tip less because of a tip screen than to tip more (18% said less and 9% said more.)

It's also unclear how much the smaller tips some waiters and hairdressers are seeing has to do with pressure to tip in new venues. Parts of the economy are slowing and Americans are still feeling the squeeze of inflation.

In any case, Kaina Lewis, who works as a server at a Burlington, North Carolina restaurant, and Lydia Stewart, a 28-year-old hair stylist in Columbia, South Carolina, are seeing a shift.

"There are down days and up days, but overall tips have gone down since COVID," said Lewis, 40.

Stewart, who borrowed more than \$18,000 for a year of cosmetology school and lives with her father to save money, makes \$11 per hour before tips. Before the COVID-19 pandemic she took in between \$40 and \$60 in tips on a typical shift. Now it's \$30 to \$50.

"On a really good promising day, I might get above \$50," she said.

Though the drop could be because customers don't have as much money left over after tipping at other businesses, she assumes it's because household budgets are tighter in the current economy.

"A lot of people are really vocal about being broke," she said.

One solution that Jayaraman's One Fair Wage and many others were lobbying for long before any changes in tipping culture is to pay workers enough that they don't have to depend on tips. Only [seven states](#) — Alaska, California, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, Oregon and Washington — require employers to pay workers the same minimum wage whether or not they are considered "tipped" employees (typically those who make at least \$30 a month in tips).



Stewart, for example, said she would need to make a total of \$25 an hour — from her base wages plus tips — to live on her own and repay her debt.

## Confused Customers

One big complication is that customers don't often know who relies on tips and who doesn't. Food delivery drivers and restaurant servers are known to depend on tips, but it is virtually impossible for customers to tell if employees at coffee houses or fast-food joints rely on gratuity, according to Anthony Advincula, a spokesperson for the Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, another advocacy group for restaurant workers.

So confusion is spreading right along with those tip screens.

“Customers don't know what to do,” Advincula said.

Becca Manning Szabo of Barrington, Rhode Island is one of those customers. She frequents a coffee shop in the lobby of her office, where she works in the communications field, and is unsure of when to tip.

“Do I give every time I get a coffee, even if it's just an iced coffee?” asked Szabo, 41.  
“How about when I order takeout at the Mexican restaurant?”

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