

What Ever Happened to Customer Service?

Ralph Kinney Bennett

- 1 You need a new vacuum cleaner. Several are on display—different prices, different features—but there are no clerks to be found. Finally a guy in a store vest slips past, trying to avoid eye contact. You begin to ask questions, but he knows even less about vacuum cleaners than you do.
- 2 You stand at the jewelry counter, waiting to look at a bracelet in the case. Two young women are giggling at the cash register. You clear your throat, but they keep talking. At last, a clerk turns to help you. Her forced smile says you're intruding.
- 3 You call a department store's customer-service line. A recording tells you, "Your call is important to us . . ." Then comes the elevator music. Five minutes later you're still waiting.
- 4 Retailing is big business in the United States. Every day, billions of transactions take place in the nation's 1.4 million stores. Ingenious technology—from cash-register scanners to computer-generated stock replenishment—speeds a staggering \$2.5-trillion-a-year flow of purchases. But why do those bad encounters with salespeople continue to bother us so?
- 5 When Yankelovich Partners asked 2500 shoppers what was "most important to you regarding customer service," people ranked courtesy, knowledgeability and friendliness at the top. Almost two out of three said that salespeople "don't care much about me or my needs."
- 6 The American Customer Satisfaction Index, developed in 1994 at the University of Michigan's National Quality Research Center, shows customer

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- treat him well," says Leah Uhrig of Brooks Brothers. And tell managers when a clerk has performed well.
- 32 3. Take your business elsewhere. Retailers are counting on your "behavioral loyalty." But think about it: Shoppers have never had so many choices. Whether it's a pair of jeans or a bottle of perfume, many stores offer the same goods. And remember, as your credit card sweeps through that register slot, the money is transferring from you to the store, not vice versa.
 - 33 Busy interviewing part-time people in preparation for the holiday shopping crunch, Gwen Taylor of the Meijer hypermart says, "We try to find people with something inside that's not in the rules and won't come through training. You have to like helping people. I think good customer service is addictive. I just want to do more. And the 'secret,' when you think about it, is just treating people like you'd want to be treated."

satisfaction declining about a point a year. Retailers now average a less-than-satisfactory 71 out of 100. Even top performers have slipped.

- 7 To look behind the figures, *Reader's Digest* traveled to malls, discount chains, home centers and neighborhood stores across the country. We spoke with customers and sales personnel. And, as we repeatedly encountered the same customer-service deficiencies, we asked industry experts to explain the poor service that plagues us.

The Invisible Shopper

- 8 Leah Uhrig of Alexandria, Va., wanted a special dress for her wedding. She began her search in high spirits, hitting a dozen pricey stores, including Neiman Marcus, Macy's and Saks Fifth Avenue. In not one did a salesperson acknowledge her, let alone ask to help. "I thought it was sad," says Uhrig—herself a 14-year sales veteran at Brooks Brothers.
- 9 "It really comes down to one word—respect," says Leonard Berry, director of Texas A&M University's Center for Retailing Studies. "We've collected the most common service complaints, and every one of them is rooted in lack of respect for the customer."
- 10 Even though shoppers are now weaned on the self-service culture, most told us that, while uncomfortable with "pushy" salespeople, they still expect a courteous recognition. There is no excuse for clerks to ignore shoppers, says Dana McLendon, a corporate manager for Fossil watch and accessories stores. "Customers must be acknowledged, even if it's just a smile."

Hello . . . Is Anybody Here?

- 11 Robert Odom, shopping at the Southcenter Mall near Seattle, finds "it's harder to get waited on now. Many stores have one person covering a tremendous area. You've got to go looking to find a clerk."
- 12 Karen Danielson, a shopper at the Cumberland Mall near Atlanta, agrees. "What I miss most," she says, "is the way you used to be able to try on clothes in the dressing room and there was someone there to help you find another size."
- 13 Even salespeople notice. Jean Schepp of Chesapeake, Va., a 24-year sales veteran with Sears, is proud of her company's renewed emphasis on customer service. She realized just how much things had changed when she helped a customer try on a coat. The woman turned in surprise and said, "How nice! It's been years since somebody helped me in a store."
- 14 What happened? John Goodman, president of Technical Assistance Research Programs, a customer-service consulting firm, told us, "To cut costs, many retailers made the mistake of trimming staff to the bone—with obvious consequences."
- 15 How good is the help once you find it? Carol Cherry, founder of Shop'n Chek, which monitors customer service for retailers and other clients, says, "One of the biggest problems we encounter is unknowledgeable and un-

trained salespeople." Bruce Van Kleeck, a vice president of the National Retail Federation, says, "We're not training as much as we used to," and urges more ongoing training for veteran salespeople.

Needed: Attitude Adjustment

- 16 When 23-year-old Capitol Hill staffer Ken Schulz entered a Florsheim shoe store in Washington, D.C., he knew what he wanted—a pair of brown loafers. There were two salesmen, one waiting on a customer, the other looking out the window. The window-gazer neither greeted Schulz nor offered help.
- 17 Finding a shoe he liked on display, Schulz asked to see a pair. Without a word, the clerk disappeared into the back, returned a few minutes later with an unopened box, gave it to Schulz and walked away. When Schulz decided on his purchase, the clerk rang up the sale and handed over the shoes. Transaction completed. Not a word from the clerk. "I got my shoes," Schulz concludes, "but I felt I didn't get what you would call customer service."
- 18 People we talked to on both sides of the counter concurred that salespeople are less courteous than they once were. Vickie Henry, CEO of Feedback Plus, a Dallas-based shopping research firm, says, "Managers defining what is expected of clerks often assume they don't have to remind people of their manners. But with the younger generation of clerks, we tell clients you'd better put manners in the job description."

The Wait of the World

- 19 "The thing that bugs me most," says nurse Andrea Remeta, leaving the South Shore Center in Alameda, Calif., "is when there are long lines and there's one person at the cash register, and they call for help and nobody comes."
- 20 Remeta echoes the feelings of almost every shopper we spoke to. After picking out more than \$200 worth of clothing late one day at the Hecht's "Red Dot" sale in Wheaton, Md., John and Jean West stood in line with five other customers. Only one of two cash registers was open. Two employees were talking nearby, ignoring the customers.
- 21 Jean West asked a clerk why the other register wasn't open. She was told it was "policy" to shut registers down a couple of hours before closing time. "But you're having a big sale," West protested.
- 22 West went to the customer-service counter, but it was vacant. She then tried the management office, where someone finally answered her page. "Without a hint of sympathy she just repeated, 'That's our policy,'" says West. "I felt I was treated badly, both for the time lost and the indifference." (Hecht's later told *Reader's Digest* it is not store policy to shut down registers early.)
- 23 According to Texas A&M's Leonard Berry, the chain of service starts with "who's managing the store." If a manager is people oriented, it will be reflected in his employees and from them to the customer.

- 24 Jerry Sharp, manager of the Wal-Mart outside Meadville, Pa., tries to "overschedule" cashiers on heavy traffic shifts and is ready to man a register himself if necessary. "No matter what we've got on the shelves," says Sharp, "the customer's last impression of us is the cashier at the checkout."
- 25 At the huge Meijer hypermart in Lexington, Ky., Gwen Taylor is "guest service" manager. She patrols the aisles with a walkie-talkie, counting shopping carts to anticipate crowds at the store's 28 checkouts. "I love it when we're able to get people through despite the rush," Taylor says. "I've waited in too many lines myself."

What's Going On?

- 26 Studies confirm what shoppers and customer-oriented retailers instinctively know: shopping is a social experience, not merely the transfer of goods. From the souk in ancient Samarkand to the mall in Paramus, N.J., the marketplace has always been one of civilization's most important social centers—the place where we most frequently interact with strangers. Despite the rise of television, catalogue and Internet buying, shoppers want to be among people. And the moments that make or break the experience involve how they are treated.
- 27 Ed Spangler, a partner with the retail-consulting unit of Arthur Andersen, adds that retailers who lead in customer service, whether large or small, often give employees the chance to have a stake in the company, and always enthruse [sic] them about its culture of service. "The formula is deceptively simple: happy employees make the best shopping environment, which satisfies customers, and satisfied customers equal shareholder value."
- 28 The sad fact is, stores can get away with poor customer service because customers let them. Customer-service expert John Goodman estimates that about half of customers continue to do business with firms they feel have mistreated them. This is "behavioral loyalty," explains Jeff Ellis of Maritz Marketing Research Inc. "We may bad-mouth a store after a bad experience, but we go back because it's close to our house or carries items we like." Many shoppers we interviewed admitted they returned to stores where service was poor.

How to Get Treated Right

- 29 Here are three weapons that customers can wield in the battle for better service:
- 30 1. Complain. Very few wronged customers—Goodman estimates five percent—formally complain. Most of us decide it's not worth our time. But top management at most of the retailers mentioned in this story were genuinely concerned about incidents where service had fallen short, and they were eager to redress the problem. So, overcome that sense of futility and make the call, write the letter or send the e-mail.
- 31 2. Be civil. There is no evidence that the decline in bad manners began with store clerks. "The attitude of the customer makes it a lot easier to