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Where has all the “service” in customer service gone? - by David De Lise

January 03, 2020 - Northern New England

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As we usher in a new year, and a new decade, I wanted to take a moment to share my perspective on a growing trend that seems to be taking shape across the retailer landscape...big box stores, regional stores, service businesses - no one is exempt. What has happened to the service in the phrase ‘customer service’?

Now, I admit, I am not always the most patient shopper when I visit stores. Typically, I am in a rush and trying to get in and get out as painlessly as possible. However, occasionally I cannot find what I am looking for in a store and, although I try to avoid it at all costs, I just have to seek out the assistance of a store employee. Truthfully, I dread having to do this for the reasons I am about to share with you.

Recently I went into a big box, soft goods store. I was looking for a pretty generic household item. So, naturally, I went to the section containing household items. Makes sense so far, right? Well, I couldn’t find it there. I went up and down several aisles becoming increasingly frustrated with the fact that not only could I not find the item I needed, but I also couldn’t find a store employee anywhere to save my life. I started walking up and down other aisles looking for help. Alas, in the oasis of food items, I found someone who was unpacking boxes, putting price tags on and stocking the shelves. I started with, “Excuse me, can I ask you a question?”, to which they responded “Yeah, I guess, if you have to.” Hmmm...when it starts out like this it usually doesn’t get better. So I proceeded to explain what I was looking for, and they stopped me in mid-sentence! “I work unpacking and shelf storing food products. I have no idea. Did you try the household section?” I then explained that I had already been there and was looking for a little guidance. “I don’t know what to tell you. Try going to the customer service desk.” they said. “That’s a great idea”, I thought, “except it’s a half mile away in the complete opposite direction from where I am standing.” I decided to ask if they could use their walkie talkie to find someone to meet me in the section. Without acknowledging my question, they grabbed their walkie talkie and mumbled something into it. They were obviously frustrated with me for daring to ask for help. The reply that came back instructed me to go to the

customer service desk for assistance. He looked at me with that “See, I told you so” look which really annoyed me. “Fine, thank you,” and off I went to customer service. I waited in line, got up to the counter and stated my need for their direction.

The first question I was asked was “Did you try the household items section?” I told them that I had and that I wasn’t able to locate the item. Then, a young woman working in the customer service area jumped on her walkie talkie and put out an APB for the item I was searching for. Crickets...not a single person responded to her. She said to “Hang on, lemme see if I can find someone for you. Could you just stand off to the side for a moment?” Ummmm...stand off to the side? Sure, I’m not in a rush to get out of here before my brain implodes or anything. After about 7 minutes (yes, I clocked it) the customer service representative called me over and sarcastically said “Did you even try looking in the household items section?” “Yes, yes I did, thank you. It wasn’t there.” She quickly responded “Are you sure because sometimes stuff gets misplaced.” I replied that it was certainly possible, and that’s why I was seeking assistance. Then it took another weird turn. “I don’t know what to tell you. We’re really busy today and no one is answering me. I suggest you go try looking in the household items section again.” At this point my patience was wearing thin and all I could say was “Okay...” in a voice that clearly let them know I was getting annoyed. On my way back to the household item section I ran into a store employee and thought “YES! Someone to help me finally. I explained what I was looking for and before I finished, the employee cut me off saying “aisle X, household items” and started walking away.

I followed them to explain that I had tried that aisle to no avail and I had already gone to customer service for help but they couldn’t get an answer for me. At this point the employee interrupted me and told me to go try in the automotive section because “sometimes the overflow lands in the back of the automotive section”.

Automotive section? Huh? For my kitchen household item? Makes perfect sense, of course.

Of COURSE the automotive section was about a mile away in the exact OPPOSITE direction from where I just completed my physical fitness portion of my day. Ugggh.

And yet off I went on my next adventure. Passing household items AGAIN, I thought that I would take one more look and I still couldn’t find it. Confident that the store personnel MUST know where to send me this time, finally, I trusted their confidence in locating my item. To my surprise, tucked into the teeniest corner on the bottom shelf was a collection of misfit toys, er, items. Mixed in with my household item was also sporting goods equipment (a can of tennis balls and a snowboard), a winter hat, a few aged-out cd’s, and several toys. WOW-makes perfect sense.

I grabbed what I needed and went up to the registers. When I got to the registers, I learned that every checkout counter typically staffed with a real life person is closed with the exception of ONE.

Yup, one open counter amongst the 12 checkout counters. Great. My quick in and out trip to the store has now taken 30 minutes. As I got up to the register, the cashier looked down at their phone AS I WAS LOADING MY ITEMS ONTO THE CONVEYOR BELT, and proceeded to not only answer

the call but also enter into a conversation with what I could only assume was their significant other. They proceeded to have a full on chat about how they (the other person) needed to take care of finding dinner on their own that evening, and then she tried explaining to the other person that she doesn't know why there wasn't enough money in the account and that they would talk later. I'm listening to this and hoping, no, praying really, that this was really just a bad dream. I made a comment, casually (I thought) about taking a call when the line is growing since there is only one open. I was told that there were plenty of self-check-out stations, and that she doesn't understand why anyone would go through a register manned by a person anymore. "Well, some of us just enjoy great conversations with store employees like you." which got a mild chuckle from the other customers in line with me, and a scathing look from the cashier.

Of course there was a problem...my item (the only one of its kind on the shelf) had a barcode that couldn't be read by the scanner. The cashier told me that I had to go back and grab another one. Wait, what? I have to go back? I told them there was only one on the shelf. "I don't know what to tell you...this one can't be scanned and I can't leave the line, so you'll have to go find one." I explained it was the ONLY item of its kind on the shelf and there were no other choices. To which they responded, "Well that's weird...we should have a TON of those". I'm sorry, but I thought tonnage was a measurement of volume, not quantity...silly me! I asked if she could look on the computer for the item, or call a manager for assistance, please. She did in fact page for assistance over the intercom, but no one showed up. The line wasn't moving and people were getting annoyed. I was frustrated. Feeling pressured, I asked what they thought we should do. "I don't know what to tell you, but I have a growing line behind you and I'm the only register open so..." Wait...what...we're giving up? After my in-store experience of exercise, frustration and what I thought would be victory over finding the item?!

I thought we were close to success, but we're giving up over the inability of a scanner to read a barcode? C'mon, we're better than that, aren't we?

Nope. As it turned out, there was no barcode and no reference sheet to check out the price for an item that, mind you, this store probably sells hundreds, if not THOUSANDS of each year. Nope, no one could help me.

So with no reasonable alternative in sight, and with no one seemingly willing to assist me, I left the item on the belt, and walked dejectedly towards the exit, wondering to myself "What the heck happened to the service part of customer service?!"

This whole experience got me thinking that maybe it's NOT the internet of things that's hurting brick and mortar stores. Perhaps it's the LACK of service IN the stores that makes more and more of us each day resolve to do our shopping online. I said that I will NEVER go into that particular store again, but I will likely have no choice at some point in time. Here's the rub, though: as I think about my 'adventure' I have to wonder - is it really the folks that are on the front line dealing with customers by the boatload during the crazy Holiday shopping season, or is it the lack of formal customer service training being provided? I won't go into another long story here, but over the past few weeks I have been paying more attention to this topic and have discussed this newfound

awareness with friends, colleagues and co-workers. To almost everyone, it seems to be reaching epidemic proportions. EVERYONE seems to have had an encounter of the bad retail store kind in recent memory. I am pretty certain this is not strictly a retail store issue, but I am noticing more and more that the level of service in customer service isn't what it used to be.

"Service" doesn't mean the same thing as it used to, and the lack thereof doesn't seem to bother those that are supposed to be providing that "service" to consumers. If somehow, someday consumers could remind/convince/encourage retailers, restaurants and any other service providers that service IS still appreciated. It still matters to customers. Something as basic as being gracious to customers or offering to assist when needed or when asked for assistance will go a long way with retaining your customers, and keep them coming back.

As sure as I am that there are plenty of examples of horrible customer service, I am equally certain there are many, many retailers, small shops, restaurants and other service providers that provide exemplary customer service, and (I hope) are rightfully recognized for their excellence. To them, I say "Thank you" and, please, keep up the great work. We notice it and we appreciate it.

Wishing a prosperous new year to all of you.

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