

Marketing Messages



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Retail service stumbles: online beats being in line

While many retailers count their pennies from a somber Christmas, others will face the reality of downsizing in the New Year. This was not the Christmas to be serving up bad customer service. I'd like to share a story, the marketing lessons learned, and how they might signal a direction to the future.

My daughter's choir was singing at Park Royal mall prior to Christmas. I had met up with my 84-year-old mother in her scooter to watch, have some lunch, and then do a little shopping for her grand children. The objective was slippers for the family. Seems pretty warm and fuzzy so far. We had stopped at a retailer where the signage at the store entrance promised displayed items at \$29 and up. Problem was, many of the slippers weren't tagged, and after repeated requests for the sales person to price check, we had yet to find one for \$29. I politely asked to be shown the \$29 models. Much confusion ensued, followed by one slipper from a tier at the back of the store being brought to my attention. I asked for a size. Again much confusion as the clerk rummaged the back storage area, tore down the display tier, with still with no mate in sight. Since we were looking for three pairs in total, I changed models, and again was met with a fruitless search. Feeling cheeky at this stage, I politely suggested I'd love to buy the items, except for one nagging problem - I have two feet, and there was only one slipper. Amidst this I had returned to the \$29 rack and retrieved a pink moccasin for my daughter, and was first told it was \$29, then \$59. It was at that point, I asked the manager to join me at the front display for an explanation of his signage. He admitted there weren't any slippers on display for \$29, but he had been told to put the sign there. I then picked up the sign and handed it to him, suggested he should either put an item for \$29 on display or remove the sign. His response? "Will you please leave..." Granted, I cut him off at this point, and I'm sure he intended to finish with "... leave that sign where it is", but I had heard enough. I informed my Mom that we had been asked to leave the store. We had been there 45 minutes trying to spend money unsuccessfully.

Before leaving I took a photo of the \$29 slipper display. From the back of the store, I could see my previously hapless customer service representative was now on the phone. He bolted across the store to inform me that he had called security to have us escorted out of the mall, because we were not allowed to take a photo without permission. Stunned, I turned to interpret the message to my hard of hearing mother. However, she obviously heard, since she had gunned the scooter and was now laying a patch through the mall.

Security never did catch up to us, and ultimately the day was saved for both this business and my Mom's Christmas shopping through their website. And that's where the interesting angle comes to this story. The website was simple to search. The prices were reduced. And the shipping was free. Could 'Sample Storefronts' be the wave of the future for products that need to be seen, touched or experienced, before being purchased online? Sure would be a smaller and cheaper footprint. I'd be willing to buy a car this way, and that would dramatically change the distribution channel for automotive companies.

"I don't know if we're ready for it. An outdoor clothing retailer in the US tried it and failed," notes David Gray, Strategist at Dig360, retail consultants in Vancouver. "I don't know if enough customers are ready to alter their shopping experience. It's still more common to hear where the website is letting down the storefront. However, multi-channel is where things are evolving," notes Gray.

Ultimately the retail experience should hinge on human interaction. But in the absence of good service, or the desire to streamline distribution systems, this new model might be an intriguing idea.

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