

The Guest REPORT

By Roberta Nedry

The rush is on. Parking lots are full. Lines are long. Phones are busy. Anxiety is high. It's that holiday time of year and the wish list challenge is under way. Merchants and retailers everywhere are in the midst of shopping frenzy. Decorations and deals greet customers at every turn and those same customers have pockets full of money. It's the season for spending and the reason for gifts galore. Amid the holiday purchasing daze, how do consumers figure it all out, and more significantly, how do they keep their sanity in doing so? What is the experience of shopping like this time of year? Since retailers prepare for this season all year long, what steps have they taken to ensure service is part of the gift-buying mix. With all the extra helping hands hired to accommodate holiday crowds, are those hands really helping...or just handling?

Think about the fact that most consumers wait in line 90 minutes a week, 4,680 minutes, or 78 hours a year. If the average U.S. life expectancy is 74.9 years, that's 5,842 hours of waiting in line during a lifetime, almost one full year. How do retailers prepare their employees to deal with the lines and the tempers within? How can service excellence take place with the pressure on? How does the frontline of retail manage the flow as holiday stress accelerates?

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It's amazing how many employees, who are responsible for greeting customers as they line up to pay their bills, really don't greet the customer. When considering the crowds, the long waits in line, and the eventual reward of being "next!" how wonderful it is to be acknowledged and appreciated for the time you have spent in line and the decision to spend money in that venue. A cheery "Hello," "Happy Holidays," "Thank you for waiting" and "Thank you for shopping with us" can melt away the anxieties and offer a new pleasant memory as customers leave with bags in hand. Eye contact is just as critical in those first few seconds of line contact. Many employees move customers through as if on the assembly line and never take time to notice the face behind the hand holding the credit card. Positive energy through sincere greetings and simple acknowledgment can generate the good feelings that entice customers, and their credit cards, to come back.

For many consumers, especially during the holidays, this may be the first visit to a particular merchant, which creates a powerful opportunity to lay the foundation for repeat visits. Management should make sure both seasonal and permanent employees are well-versed and trained on all holiday merchandise and promotions and/or have the ability and willing-

ness to track down requested merchandise. A recent visit to The Gap at Coco Walk in Coconut Grove resulted in mixed impressions of this very concept. When we first entered, we were ignored by the first sales associate (he was on the phone with a friend) and the second associate seemed confused by our questions. Luckily, Diana, the manager, showed up and not only answered our questions but filled us in on The Gap's online services, Body by Gap, Gap for Kids, and tracked down all our merchandise needs, even some we didn't.

Thanks to her product knowledge and initiative, the register jingled a little bit extra and we learned more about The Gap and various products and services for future visits.

A calm, unflappable disposition is another wonderful holiday tactic, as we learned from Larry, a sales associate at Bentley's Luggage in the Galleria Mall. It was minutes until closing time and we told him our luggage needs and time constraints. We were quite particular and asked lots of questions. Larry knew his stuff and moved luggage on and off the shelf, continually relating to our comments and never challenging them. He never rushed us, even though the store was now closed, and was always pleasant. We left with the sense that his whole mission had been to please us and gain our trust. We also left with three pieces of luggage! Remaining calm and easing customer anxieties amid the stress of holiday decisions can be any employee's gift to a customer.

And, when everyone is in a hurry, it's easy to take shortcuts. Quick answers, minimal efforts and abrupt responses can leave customers stranded. After two frustrating visits to Office Depot in Fort Lauderdale, searching for year 2000 calendar inserts for my DayTimer before the year 2000 gets here, I finally met Mike V., who took the search on with gusto. Whereas previous sales associates had claimed they were in stock yet were unable to find them, Mike V. was committed and persistent. Perched upon a wheeled ladder, he moved every box on upper shelves, turned things over and around, peeked in between cracks and crevices, and emerged victorious with the thin package of year 2000 tabs. He did not and would not give up and made it his personal mission to satisfy my request where others had failed. In fact, he exceeded my expectations with his efforts.

Discovering the gift of service can be one of the unexpected joys of the season, as with Diana, Larry and Mike V. Employees and employers who care are the real holiday treasures and a great reason to come back. □

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