

T'is Not the Season to Be Jolly

By Cheryl Crumb

The snow is falling, tree farms are proclaiming a decorator's bounty, carolers are practicing high C's, and Santa is everywhere. This should be a time of joy; it should be a shopper's paradise. But I, for one, have a love/hate relationship with this season. I love the thought of the giving, and the kids' faces... but the thought of walking into stores has me reaching for Prozac.

Why? I'm of the firm belief that from December 1st onward, the chromosomal makeup of all retailers changes. People who normally are wondrously human suffer the effects of their mystical frontal lobotomy. Let me usher in the Spirit of Christmas Past to share his observations of Decembers of yore.

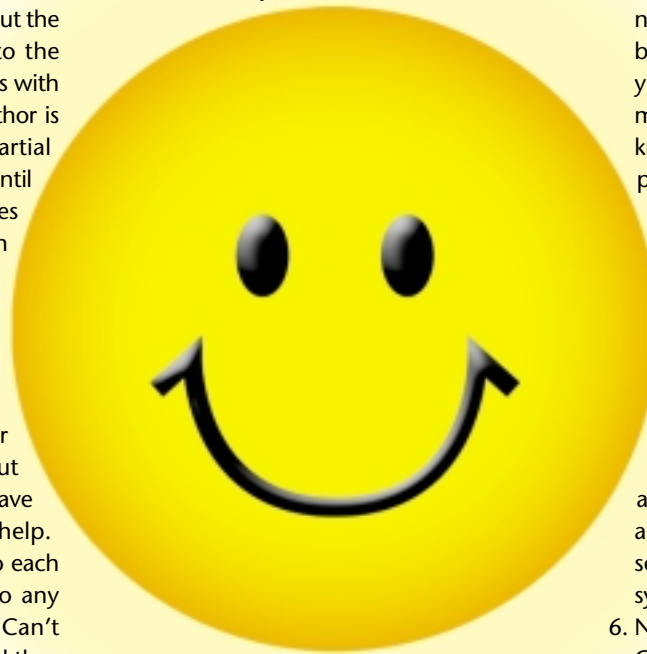
Picture the author entering the store, showing interest in a display of cookware that the retailer is demonstrating. She smiles at the retailer and asks intelligent questions about the product's capabilities. One minute into the conversation, another shopper interrupts with an off-topic question. In a flash, the author is forgotten, and left hanging with a partial question in the air. She waits patiently until 3 minutes pass, when the retailer rushes off to another area of the store with customer no. 2. The author has turned invisible.

Another scene flashes. It's the grand opening of a home ware superstore in a local mall. Adorned with the lights and decorations of the season, it's a winter wonderland through the windows. But grouches and stocking-coal recipients have replaced the normally hospitable help. Eavesdropping on their conversations to each other – because no one is speaking to any customers – we hear phrases of "Can't management put things where they said they would?", "Why in the hell do I have to work on opening day with all these animals rushing into the store?", "We better get paid quadruple time because this job today is a pain-in-the-proverbial". Suddenly the charm of the surroundings tarnishes from the sucking-out negative energy.

The final vignette: The author on Boxing Day as she enters three establishments. No. 1: "What is it you want this time?", said with a minute-long sigh and rolling eyes. No. 2: "Can't you read the sign – no exchanges until December 28", and No. 3: "I'm not here to help customers, I'm here to take your money." Fa la la la la... it is not the season to be jolly!

Keep me away from holiday retailers!
Now, no doubt this is a trying time for retailers, but there are several guidelines that come into play as the Ides of December approach:

1. Put yourself in your customer's shoes. Picture the weary shopper, burdened with the task of buying a present for her spouse's Great Aunt Sally, having walked 4 km. from the car in the frozen parking lot, using credit cards because the debit card is maxed out, bathed in sweat from the 5 layers of wool required outside, and carrying 72 pounds of bags with handles breaking way.
2. Don't take the customer for granted. I live in a province where the residents recently voted in a new government. We usually don't hear politicians say, "we goofed". Instead they blame the media, the



economy, the populace, anybody but themselves. Elections are a way for citizens to convey the message, "You didn't care about us". As retailers, look to see if your old customers are returning. They might be sending you a message. Are you receiving it?

3. Beware the word "policy". Example: It's not our policy to give refunds without a receipt. Our policy is you can't return gifts on Boxing Day. Our policy is no more than 3 items of clothing in the change room. Policies irk customers, especially when they don't make sense. Bureaucracy replaces individuality. The larger companies become,

the more policy-laden they are. The more policies you have, the less creative, caring human beings you need. Examine your policies. Are they necessary? If not, get rid of them. Are they friendly? If not, change the wording. "Keep off the grass" gets less endorsement than "Help us keep our grass beautiful".

4. Don't process people like meat in a butcher shop. Taking numbers, waiting, and hearing "Next!" in fascist military tones doesn't lend itself to customer loyalty. The goal is not volume of customers standing in line. Have enough staff so that people don't feel ignored. Maintain eye contact and smile at those who are waiting. Customers don't like to feel as if they're invisible.
5. Be prepared for the perils of the season. Anticipate that customers may have strong needs for information, for their own well-being, and for their emotions. Think like your customers. If you were doing last minute shopping, wouldn't you want to know how quickly to find the right type of product or how your pricing compares with others or what differentiates you from the millions of displays that look just like yours? Mightn't you be concerned about your kids' boredom and need to roam or your husband's impatience or your own weariness? Isn't it natural to feel frustration for the endless looking or excitement when you've found the perfect gift? Be ready. Provide a small safe area for kids to play, have a massage chair and TV for waiting partners, assign someone who can act as the official GPS system.
6. No matter who you are, you are the Customer Complaint Department. You are also the Customer Greeting Department, the Customer Caring Department, The Customer Assistance Department, and the Customer Follow-through Department. In other words, your job description is irrelevant and the customer's success is your first, second and third priority.

Being the eternal optimist, I will venture out again into the world of consumerism this holiday season. However, I will be visiting three less stores than last year. Why am I so hopeful? I'm willing to hope that retailers are becoming more customer-focused. The alternative? I'll be either making most of my presents this year, or reaching for my e-Bay password!