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“The Customer is Always Right” Has Created Many Dreadful Customers

Over 113 years ago, an American retail magnate named Harry Gordon Selfridge, Sr. was said to have coined the phrase “The customer is always right!” This novel approach to customer satisfaction was a major reason why his London-based department store, Selfridge’s, became wildly successful. Many businesses have adopted this philosophy in the years since, with varying degrees of success. But it seems we have now entered an age whereby enough patrons have become so shameless in their treatment of proprietors, that Selfridge’s storied proverb should be discarded, posthaste.

Mr. Selfridge, meet “Bob”

One example that comes to mind involves a gentleman by the alias “Bob.” Bob burst through the glass double-doors of the dealership’s entrance, made a beeline for the apparel department, and asked to be fitted with “your very best touring suit.” The young lady who staffed this department, her hands full with other customers on the scene, glanced outside. She couldn’t help but notice that Bob had pulled up on a gleaming new K 1600 GTL, farked out to the max. She smelled a big fish,

and prepared to reel him in. “Sure thing,” she exclaimed, flashing Bob her sunniest smile. And so began the plunge into a sadistic test of endurance for her, as well as the absolute folly of Selfridge’s motto in 2022 America.

Bob wanted the fanciest, most functional suit money could buy, and wanted everyone within earshot to know that money was no object for him. The apparel attendant complied and pulled out a Euro-brand suit within kissing distance of \$2,000. Bob tried it on, and proclaimed that the jacket was too tight across his chest, while the pants were too loose at the waist. So, she went back to the stock room and pulled out more garments, mixing and matching to fit Bob’s requirements. Finally, Bob was satisfied with the fit, but had second thoughts about the color. She rushed to the back again and pulled out the same hybrid suit in a different hue.

Bob then asked what other brands were available, and demanded to try all of them on, too. The same cycle of fitment and color fussiness followed as Bob worked his way through at least ten other premium brand suits. By this time, a proverbial mountain of

motorcycling attire littered the floor of the apparel department, as Bob threw down what he rejected while the harried attendant repeatedly ran the marathon back and forth between him and the stock room.

I know what you’re thinking as you’re reading this - there are some customers who just aren’t worth the trouble! Why didn’t the young lady just politely tell Bob that she couldn’t help him any further? The answer lies in the inexperienced salesperson’s mindset, wherein the farther you fall into a hole with a problem customer, the more you keep digging. It’s counterintuitive, but from the apparel attendant’s perspective, she had already invested so much of herself into Bob, that she simply had to get that sale to have something to show for all of her effort!

The action continued for another two hours as Bob finally settled on the suit that he had originally tried on. He next set his sights on matching gloves. Then boots. Then sunglasses. Then a full-face helmet. Each of these was yet another pedantic saga for the distraught apparel attendant. Eons later, as you may have guessed by now, he walked out of the dealership without purchasing a single thing!

But the coup de grâce was yet to land. Several weeks later, Bob swaggered into the dealer again, this time holding the very same type of jacket he had settled on (but didn’t buy.) He approached the wary apparel attendant, obviously

confident that as the “customer” he was “always right,” and explained that he had ultimately purchased the jacket online to save \$25 vs. the dealer price. The jacket had a faulty button snap. Bob wanted her to handle the warranty paperwork and logistics, even though he hadn’t purchased the suit from her shop. Naturally, he was outraged when she refused. “But... you’re an official dealer of this brand!” he ranted.

Bob then proceeded to melodramatically stomp out of the shop, promising to launch an online crusade against the dealership for what he claimed was “poor customer service” - which he did, in earnest. Bob’s requisite 1-star reviews and histrionic tirades were soon published on several sites, which undoubtedly cost the dealership potential business.

Online or in the dealership?

It is indeed quite depressing that in 2022, we have grown adults who do not understand the concept of “value

added,” and think nothing of wasting the valuable time of shop employees who work primarily on commission. It is peculiar when avid consumers of \$25,000-35,000 pleasure toys are suddenly parsimonious when it comes to a \$25 delta on a \$1,100+ jacket. It is disappointing when we observe folks price-checking items on the dealer floor with Amazon, because the dealer’s brick and mortar building - with all of its associated fixed and variable operational costs - exists for us customers to engage with products in real time, and is thus worth a few extra bucks we pay for various items.

Where will we be, when all that’s left is the virtual world of distant warehouses and no local hands-on expertise?

This sword cuts both ways, of course. Most of us experienced motorcyclists have been burned by a “stealership” at least once in our riding careers. Inflated prices, incompetent mechanics, parts shortages, frustra-

tion with repair timeframes - you name it. So, it goes without saying that dealers need plenty of happy, loyal customers to keep the doors open and the lights on.

Indeed, there are entire libraries chock full of business books with insightful ideas about how to cultivate, engage with, and satisfy good customers. However, there is a noticeable deficiency on the nature of what makes a *good customer* to begin with. Let’s start with this: Don’t be like Bob and remember the Golden Rule!

Obviously, Harry Gordon Selfridge, Sr. intended for “the customer is always right” to serve as the motivational ideal for high quality service that goes above and beyond expectations. But these days, dishonest businesses plus self-absorbed customers who are “always right” equal an increasingly acrimonious transactional culture within the industry that we must work to stamp out.

All of us on both sides of the counter can - and should - do better.

