How Customers Impose on Merchants

Edward J. Beck in Dearborn Weekly.

During the exceptionally hot weeks of last summer, one of the large shoe stores in Detroit found that, contrary to expectations, the number of women entering the store to be waited on was increasing. Sultry and rainy days are usually times of inactivity, but in this instance more women came in to shop than on the temperate days.

But these women did not buy. The harassed clerk often took down a dozen pairs of shoes for a customer and frequently none of them were found satisfactory. Sales fell off, as they usually did at this season, but the clerks were kept busy showing merchandise to these feminine prospects.

One merchant called the attention of a fellow shoe dealer to this condition, and when the shoe men generally compared notes as they met each other, it developed that during the blistering days the same state of affairs was being repeated more or less in all the downtown stores.

A woman entered a store, seated herself with a sigh of relief and had her shoe removed. She wasn't sure exactly what she wanted; she was interested in the latest styles and wondered "what they are wearing now?" While the clerk was taking down some boxes, the customer removed the other shoe. First, there was some difficulty about size; then there seemed to be no style that suited exactly and finally she looked at her watch and said she had to hurry away to keep an oppointment. She would come back later.

Here is the explanation that was finally found for this behavior. These women had come in not to inspect merchandise or to buy, but to rest their feet. They had come downtown in tight-fitting shoes, and walking on the hot pavements had swelled their feet to a painful degree. So they took a recess from their shopping and went into the only available place where they could get a temporary relief from their acute discomfort.

A woman with a belligerent mien went into a jewelry store with a bundle and asked where the adjustment department was. She was directed to the third floor.

"Have you your sales slip?"

"No."

"How much did you pay for the set?" The woman mentioned a figure. "I've only had the set a short time and it's not what I want." As a matter of fact, she had had the set three months.

One of the well-known principles of this store is that "the customer is always right." The woman wasn't given a chance to squabble or argue, but was given the amount she asked without further questioning. She took the money and went to the elevator.

A sale of silverware was going on downstairs on the main floor. A 25 per cent. reduction on all merchandise had been advertised. The woman went over to the silverware counter and bought another set exactly like the one she had just returned a few minutes before. She made a profit of 25 per cent. and thus completed successfully what she considered a neat stroke of business.

The average American has a strong sense of fair play; he expects and gives a square deal. He is a reasonable fellow with whom to do business. But every large store has a minority of customers who take advantage of the merchant in many ways. The irascible customer is one of the pests who make the life of the clerk miserable. He illogically demands preferential treatment and is likely to explode in an abusive display of ill temper on slight pretext.

But certain impositions of the unreasonable and dishonest customer do more than detract from the general joy of life. They increase the cost of doing business and thus add to the prices the rest of us must pay for what we buy.

Take the matter of returned merchandise. One manager told me that 20 per cent. of the goods sold in his place were later returned for credit. Another department store official who has studied the situation in a dozen different large cities estimated the percentage to be between 15 and 20 per cent.

"That's conservative," he said. "We had one customer who bought $300 worth last month, but her net bill was only $24., She is an extreme and exceptional example of abuse of credit and the return privilege."

"How do you prevent this sort of abuse?" I asked.

"In this store we have no set rule; our first consideration is to retain the good will of our customer, but some of the most modern stores require that the net bill shall be equal to at least 50 per cent. of the gross bill. Another store I know about will not withdraw credit privileges unless the percentage of returns is 75 per cent. of the total purchases."

The practice of promiscuously returning goods entails a needless expense which must be borne out of the general profits of the business. The cost of delivery, the extra clerical work and a double amount of bookkeeping increase the overhead cost of doing business to which all the customers must contribute.

Some customers who have accounts in several stores order the same sort of merchandise from each so that they can compare the goods in their own home. They keep only one article and send back the rest. The fact that they are inconveniencing the dealer and putting him to unnecessary expense does not seem to bear any weight with them.

Wealthy patrons are sometimes the worst offenders in this respect. One bookseller has a number of rich customers who give occasional week-end house parties at their country homes. They order a dozen of the latest volumes sent out on approval. A few days later ten of the books come back as "not wanted." Frequently half of them bear evidence of having been read clear through, but only two or three are paid for.

"I can't do anything about it," said the dealer, "because I don't dare antagonize such prominent people."

"The tricky customer lacks originality," said another bookman. "He's just like the fellow in a strange hotel who on retiring puts his money in his shoe to prevent robbery. He thinks his stunt is original. If a robber did sneak in the first place he would look would be in the shoe.

"Some people bring in books and want their money back. They have what they think is a plausible story. A husband or uncle or somebody has presented them with a copy of the same identical work and so they have no further use for the book. Usually they have read the book through; that can easily be detected from the way the book opens and by the fact that the back of it is not quite at right angles with the cover. They think they have a new yarn to fool us, but it's old stuff. I hear it almost every day.

"Some otherwise honest persons seem to have a double code of morality when it comes to books. Books and matermelons in a patch seem to be on the exempt list of honesty. We lose a lot through stealing. Our technical department suffers the greatest losses; the sturdy mechanic sees a $5 work on motors or a similar subject, and he seems to feel because it's his special find he is entitled to it free of charge.

"In our second hand department, one of the biggest nuisances is the man who comes in and makes our place a daily reading room. We encourage reading, but the fellow I am talking about will hide the work that interests him my putting it in the wrong place so he can find it when he comes back again. Meanwhile we can't put our hands on it."

Another nuisance to the storekeeper is the woman who "shops around" without ever having any intention of buying. Her peculiar method of having a good time at no expense adds to the burdens of the merchant and causes delay for the bona fide customer, who has to wait until the clerk is finished with her.

An explanation for the futile mercantile sight-seeing is that it flatters the vanity to be waited upon. Some persons have an abnormal craving for attention; they enjoy being served. The restaurant or hotel that has a liveried footman to open the door recognizes this human weakness and caters to it. The customer who compels a clerk to take down a large assortment of articles and to heed her slightest preferences thereby experiences the shallow emotions of a temporary supremacy. She has found a cheap way of gratifying her egotism.

One of the ways by which dishonest customers get credit is to establish an account at two good stores, where they promptly meet their bills. They can then go to any other place in town and give these firms as references. They are given a high rating by the latter and on this basis the new store extends a liberal credit to them. They buy as much as they can, at as many places as they can and then disappear.

I was talking about some of the ways by which customers impose on merchants with a woman executive, who is connected with the Retail Research Association, an organization backed by the twelve or fifteen leading department stores of the country. Their aim is to modernize merchandising methods by exchanging records of experience and to promote business by finding new and better ways of really serving the customer. At the time the woman was installing a new service department in one of the member stores in a large middle western city.

"What are you doing to prevent the petty impositions of the customer?" I asked her.

"Nothing," she replied. "We never question the justice of a customer's demand. We try to satisfy them no matter how unreasonable they may be."

"Then you have a 'heaping coals of fire' policy?"

"We're not quite so idealistic as all that. We never ask: 'Is the customer right or wrong?' Our only concern is: 'Is he satisfied?' We take back any merchandise for credit, even if it has been used, because we believe that any goods which the customer has in his home which he regrets buying do us more harm there than if we lost his purchase money by a refund."

"You certainly wouldn't take back a used toothbrush, would you?"

"Yes, we would, but as soon as the adjuster had given back the money, he'd throw it in the wastebasket right in front of the customer's eyes. We never make any remonstrances or ask any questions until the customer has his refund and then we may try to get more details about the cause of the dissatisfaction. We avoid even the appearance of hedging on our policy.

"A woman comes in and launches a loud and long tirade about a transaction. She says she'll never trade here again and calls us a lot of names. Our man listens patiently until she has all her grievances off her chest and then he asks: "What do you want us to do about it?" And whatever she says, we'll do.

"Of course, a lot of customers are unreasonable. But when we satisfy them they are our best advertisement. If they send in a small sample of calico for matching and want us to get them 10 cents worth of it, we will if necessary put a $25-a-week shopper on a whole afternoon's shopping tour to find what she wants, provided we haven't it. A woman wrote in from a suburb and said she wanted some genuine cotton bolls for a wedding anniversary. She said she knew we didn't have such things, but asked us to get them anyhow. We wrote to some Texas connections of ours and they finally found what the woman wanted, after scouring the whole city of Waco. We wrote the woman that she had set us to a difficult task, because cotton was out of season and the new harvest was some months ahead. And we told her in detail how whole would benefit.

we had gone about filling her request. I'll venture to say that every person at that party heard about our unusual efforts; and we got advertising we could have procured in no other way because the story of those cotton bolls was interesting and worth telling.

"A woman telephoned in from a country town 40 miles out and said she had to attend a funeral that afternoon and had no black shoes good enough to wear. She gave the size and asked us to hurry some out. An utterly unreasonable request—but in 20 minutes we had a special messenger with the shoes in a taxi on the way to the station. He missed the train and then took an interurban, arriving just ahead of the required time.

"A doctor telephone in on the fifth of July and said he was just going to perform an operation and had found that his electric fan had been stolen over the Fourth. He wanted another at once and was very particular about the make. We didn't have the make he insisted on. Then he made the unreasonable request that we loan him one of ours until he could buy a duplicate of the stolen one. In 10 minutes we had a fan on the way by special messenger. Before the boy reached there, a colleague in a neighboring office came in with the doctor's fan. He had borrowed it."

The store at which this executive is working is one of the most profitable mercantile enterprises in the United States. The owners have built up their business on the theory that "the public is always right" and their attitude of Tolstoyan nonresistance to the unreasonable demands of the customer has apparently been a remunerative one. The same principle, I was told, governed the leading stores in Boston, Cleveland, New York, St. Louis and other large cities.

But prices would come down to a certain extent if we who constitute the buying public would let our relations with the merchant be governed by the principles of fair play and the square deal. The cost of storekeeping would be reduced and the consumers as a

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"Bridget, who broke this iron kettle?"

"The cat, mum."

"But I don't keep a cat on account of the canary."

"Then it must have been the canary."

Copper poisons have been found in ten per cent of the "bootleg" liquors that have been analyzed in Massa-

USE PENNY COLUMN—IT PAYS

Prince or Peasant.

Paris, Dec. 9.—One of the most amazing of royal mysteries has just been recalled by the one hundredth anniversary of the death of Czar Alexander I., of Russia. After Alexander's "death" on December 1, 1825, it was rumored that an empty coffin had been lowered into the earth in the imperial burial place, and that the Czar was spending the evening of his days in prayer and contemplation.

Popular unbelief, indeed, identified a hermit calling himself Fedor Kusmitch, with the late monarch. Kusmitch, whose past life was a complete mystery, appeared about this time in the depths of the Siberian forest. He was frequently visited by the Czar Nicholas I., who treated him with the most profound respect.

If Kusmitch was really Alexander I., he carried his secret with him to the grave. But a new turn was given to speculation on the subject three years ago, when the tombs of the Czars were opened by order of the Soviet authorities. The original seals on the coffin of Alexander I. were still intact, but when opened there was nothing in it but a few lumps of lead.

The largest covered ice rink in Europe has just been opened in Berlin.

No Brandy Available.

Kinston, Dec. 9.—The coming Christmas will be the gloomiest in one respect that two generations of Lenoir countains have experienced. Eggnogg is not good without brandy and old-timers declare there is not a drop to be had in the county for the first time in 200 years.

Age in racehorses is always reckoned from the January of the year in which the horse is born. A horse, therefore, which was born at the beginning of December would be set down as a year old the following January, even though he had only been in this world a month.

A Great Conditioner

Joe Benjamin, known as the "Sheik of Hollywood," and his wife, Marion Nixon, screen star, are firm believers in plenty of outdoor exercise to keep one in excellent physical trim and thus enhance one's worth in the work-a-day world. Most every day you can find the two out for a jog on some country highway far removed from the city's noise and hustle. Here they are shown on one of their usual jaunts. Bejamin, in case you don't know, is a promising boxer in the lightweight division, and some day hopes to hold the crown that Benny Leonard vacated several months ago.