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Entrepreneurial Tightrope

Gladys Edmunds

Road rage flares in shopping-cart aisles

During lunch with my friend Marta last week, she told me she had just read an article about the rise of consumer rage. I laughed and asked her if that were anything like road rage. "I'm not kidding!" she said. "This is for real."

I understand Marta's concern. Poor customer relations have an enraging effect on consumers, raising the mercury level on their thermometers.

A couple of incidents come to mind.

Recently I was in a store's health-and-beauty aisle, sampling hand cream, when I overheard a conversation between a female shopper and a male clerk. The customer wanted a supplement for arthritis. She had been using a product from a vitamin store at the shopping mall and was not satisfied with the results.

She took an empty container of the supplement from her purse and told the clerk she wanted to compare the ingredients to make certain the clerk's recommendation was not the same as the product she had used. She didn't want to get stuck again with a supplement that didn't perform as promised.

The clerk snapped his fingers to command her complete attention and told the woman she was not in a mall store and that neither his store nor his products were to be compared to such.

With a shocked look, she told the clerk she knew very well she wasn't in the mall, then spun her shopping cart around and walked away.

Next, the clerk addressed me: "Do you wanna buy a jar of that cream?"

I said no, thank you, and proceeded to leave. As I rounded the corner of another aisle

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I overheard the clerk loudly telling a different clerk that people would be coming in all winter to put cream on their hands with no intention of buying.

Thinking the remark was meant for me I went back and lathered my hands again, and my arms as well!

When I got to the checkout line the woman who felt insulted was in front of me. The cashiers were in the process of a shift change, which took a few extra minutes. The woman started shouting at the cashier, telling her she didn't appreciate being delayed. The incoming cashier apologized and said the previous cashier was going off duty. "I don't want to hear that," shouted the woman. "You people are inept."

The cashier looked hurt and confused by the outburst.

What the cashier didn't realize is the customer was transferring rudeness, in the form of rage, from one store clerk, to the customer, back to store personnel.

And then there is this from a friend I'll call "Annie." I had told her to make a point of ordering chai eggnog latte when she went to the local coffee house. I assured her she would be pleased. She took me up on my recommendation and called back with this story.

Annie and a co-worker ordered the lattes. The co-worker also purchased a toffee bar that was cold when she bit into it. When she mentioned this to the clerk, he said the toffee bar had just been taken from the freezer. She asked if he could warm it up.

The clerk asked if the pastry were frozen. "It's not frozen, just extremely cold," she said. The clerk told her she could solve the situation easily — "just warm it up between your hands."

What is happening to customer service? I have heard all kinds of excuses from employees, ranging from unhappiness with their duties to being over-worked and stressed out. None is valid.

One potential solution rests with how the customer responds to poor customer service.

I suggested to Annie that both she and her co-worker send a written complaint to the coffee-house company's president.

Often, it is a waste of time to complain only to store employees. Consumers should take their concerns to managers who can effect change.

No company that wants to stay in business will ignore a written complaint.

I have read that written complaints should state what the customer wants to feel better about the situation. I disagree with this approach. I believe the customer give complete details of the incident and then ask the company what they plan to do about it.

What's interesting about the incidents I've cited is they arose at large nationally known companies.

An article in *The Motley Fool* by personal finance expert Dayana Yochim addresses the problem. It quotes Scott Broetzmann, president of Customer Care Measurement & Consulting and co-founder of Customer Care Alliance, as saying: "Corporations need to overcome the myth that customers are crooks; that customers want something for nothing; that customers are unreasonable."

In the meantime I ask entrepreneurs, large and small: Do you know how your employees are handling customer complaints?

The big shopping season has begun and you want to make sure your customers are being taken care of.

Gladys Edmunds' Entrepreneurial Tightrope column appears Wednesdays. [Click here](#) for an index of her columns. As a single, teen-age mom, Gladys made money doing laundry, cooking dinners for taxi drivers and selling fire extinguishers and Bibles door-to-door. Today, Edmunds, 52, is founder of Edmunds Travel Consultants in Pittsburgh and author of There's No Business Like Your Own Business, a six-step guide to success published by Viking. You can visit her website at www.gladysedmunds.com.

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