

# Retail Adventures in the Real World™

By Rich Kizer & Georganne Bender

## Stalking Customers for Fun & Profit



Observation  
will teach you  
volumes about your store

**A**s Retail Anthropologists, we log hundreds of hours each year literally watching customers shop. Wearing seasonal attire and very comfortable shoes, we pick a store, stake out its important vantage points, then do our best to blend in with the fixtures. We never know what we'll see – and we've seen some things not fit to print!

We quietly observe customers, watching what they pick up, put down, how much time they spend in each aisle, and how they interact with the store personnel. Sometimes we'll follow a particularly interesting shopper throughout the store, and sometimes we keep an eye on everyone. It's always interesting, and it's very necessary in the construction of our "Retail Adventures in the REAL World" keynotes and seminars. You need to do it as well. After all, how can you possibly expect to do your best if customers aren't comfortable shopping in your store?

## THE RULES

There are a couple of rules that you have to follow.

First, you must tell every associate in the store to ignore

you. Unless the place is on fire, every associate HAS to pretend that you have no connection to the store.

Second, you have to dress in the same manner as your customers. If it's 20 degrees below zero and customers are wearing snowmobile suits and fur-lined hats, then you do, too. If customers frequently shop your store with children in tow, or pushing a stroller, then you do that as well. You cannot stalk customers or experience their point of view unless you actually become one of them.

We're high-tech stalkers. We always carry a pad of paper and a pen with us on our stalking excursions; you may opt for a small handheld tape recorder. Either way, you'll be covered when you want to document something unusual.

## THE STALKING

The Stalking Customers Exercise begins in your car. Here's what we typically do – you can do the same.

- **How does your store look from the road?** Check it out from all directions. Drive to a spot about a block away, park, and view your store. Pretend you are a customer who



has never been to your store. How does it look? Watch what customers do when they approach your store. Is it easy for them to find it or do they appear confused?

Do you have a sign that's visible from the road – from all directions? What about the exterior sign? Is it large enough to read from the road? Check out your exterior sign during the day and at night to make sure it is properly illuminated.

Is your storefront easy to pick out among neighboring stores? Is there anything in particular that indicates to a potential customer what you sell?

Choose a different route to drive to work each day for about a week. Note what you see as you approach the store from each direction. In each case, document what works and what you need to fix.

• **What's going on in the parking lot?** We've watched more than one female customer struggle to unload the kids, a stroller, the diaper bag, and her purse, plus armloads of toys. If she is too far from the front door to schlep everything all at once, and there are no shopping carts available, then she has to juggle everything to set up the stroller.

If it's a nightmare on a clear day, you can only imagine what it must be like in the rain. (Yes, we've done this exercise in the rain, and in snow – lots of snow. You need to as well.)

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If you make it easier for customers in the parking lot, they will be relaxed, focused, and ready to shop once inside your store.

Is your parking lot free of debris? Older customers have a fear of falling, and they frequently tell us they will not shop in places that appear to be hazardous to maneuver.

Is your parking lot well lit? A shopping center on the east coast has security guards patrol the lot at night to help customers feel more secure. And since the majority of customers are female, the security guards are, too. Could you partner with your landlord or other tenants in your shopping center and do the same? Remember, to your customers, that

generic parking lot you all share is YOUR parking lot.

• **What's going on right outside the front door?** Fair or not, we do judge books by their covers, and we judge stores by their windows. How do yours look?

Are they clean and inviting or loaded with tape remnants and last month's circus posters? Are the displays well thought out? Would they make you stop and shop? Check your windows daily to ensure they still look as fresh as they did when you first set them.

Do you have merchandise displayed outside your store? If so, have you taken as much care with your outside displays as with inside displays? Merchandise that's thrown in dump displays or on folding tables outside your front door screams, "This is the junk we can't sell inside the store!" or worse, it can look like you're going out of business.

We see bad outdoor displays all the

time, even in the finest stores. And we frequently see customers laugh at them and keep right on walking. Remember, the customer's first 10-second impression of your store is often the one that lasts.

• **Now, move inside of the store.** Stop right inside the front door and you'll be in your store's Decompression Zone. This 5' to 15' space is where customers stop and catch their breath before the real shopping begins.

Spend a few minutes here and look around. Will customers trip over signage they will never see? Are there clean carts nearby but not in the way? If you don't have carts, you need baskets – not in the Decompression Zone, but visible to customers as they enter the store.

How does the store look overall – is it inviting? If it's winter and you're wearing a heavy coat, can you easily

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move around? Does the store have an easy-to-understand seasonal theme? If you're in the midst of a sale or event, does the store scream the theme?

- **Be a fly on the wall.** Now, choose a prime spot in the store and stand and watch for at least a half hour. If you simply observe, and don't move around too much, you'll become invisible, and you'll see your store as you've never seen it before.

After five minutes, you'll notice details that you didn't see right away, and you'll see customers being, well, customers. You'll observe how they interact with your displays, individual product, and with your associates.

You may also see your associates in their true light – that new hire you thought was so shy may be a dynamo when it comes to suggestive selling. Brace yourself, though, because you just might witness a trusted associate cutting corners or ignoring customers. We've seen both.

After 10 minutes of observation time, you'll see even more, and you'll see customers do things you never saw them do before.

Note what they buy – both basic goods and complementary items – and how much time they spend pondering each purchase. These observations will become good ideas for displays, end features, and future merchandising directions.

How long does a customer typically spend in each aisle? Are there some aisles they seem to like more than others? Do they open boxes for a closer look or play with the demo items? Do they leave their carts or baskets or children stranded in the aisle in search

of related items? If you've carefully cross-merchandised all products necessary to complete a project, then there is no reason to abandon the child in the cart, which they say they wouldn't do anyway. Instead most opt to leave the store.

Here's another thing to consider: If you're like most retailers and have 84" gondolas and/or tall wall units, you're likely to observe customers climbing your fixtures to reach for product. We see customers do this all the time. In fact, we've dug more than one customer out of the pile of merchandise that fell on their heads.

Customers know climbing fixtures is stupid and dangerous, but they do it anyway. Georganne even admits she occasionally scales store fixtures, and she's 5'7" tall. Imagine what it's like for a shopper who tops the charts at 5'3". Are your associates likely to come to the rescue of customers who need a little extra help?

- **Check out the checkouts.** Before you hang up your stalking attire for the day, spend some quality time observing what goes on at the checkout counters. This is the customer's last impression of your store, and it's an important impression because it very often determines if the customer will come back and shop with you again.

Are your checkouts easily accessible for customers of all sizes, regardless of height? Are they neat? Is there enough space to put your stuff down and write a check? Is there a cool display at the checkout to encourage impulse purchases?

Now, stand off to the side for

awhile and just watch what's going on. Are your cashiers friendly to every single customer? Do they ask customers if they found everything they were looking for? Do they talk about what's going on in the store? Do they explain/offer bag stuffers? Are customers making returns treated with the same level of great service as customers who are buying?

- **Different days, different times, different customers.** It's easy to get what we call "Retailer Tunnel Vision" – a disease that causes you to only focus on what's on your agenda for the day. You miss the big picture – the unique things that set you apart from other stores. You also miss what's important to customers, and to store associates. So each day, at different times, take a break and look around.

Commit to becoming a fly on the wall and make our Stalking Customers Exercise an integral part of your monthly routine. Pick one day a month to perform this exercise, and choose a different day of the week each time.

And you may want to bring a partner along the next time. With another set of eyes and ears, you'll be able to discuss what each of you saw, and even more importantly, how you can work your observations to your advantage.

Watch your customers closely, and you will be able to implement changes that make it easy for them to choose your store over any other. They'll swear you've become a mind reader! ♦

