



Retail Adventures in the Real World™

BY RICH KIZER & GEORGANNE BENDER

Where's The Excitement?

A store is a store is a store, right? Maybe, but it just doesn't seem fair that Rich can walk into virtually any clothing store, in any city, and buy a suit in no time flat. Then he can have it altered the same day – for free. And if there's a Men's Wearhouse in town, he can just about phone in his order.

For women, it's quite a different story. Every store carries the same brands, in the same styles, the same colors, merchandised the same way. So when Georganne wants a new suit, she gets to pick from 57 versions in her choice of black, black, or black. Occasionally, she'll find a few in beige, just to throw her off.

Shopping has become boring. A chore. Where's the excitement? The thrills? The new stuff that we couldn't wait to buy?

Are you feeling pretty smug right about now? Don't get too comfortable.

It's gotten so bad that you could literally drop us from a helicopter into any craft store in America, and we wouldn't be able to tell you which one we're in.

Consider our most recent mystery shopping excursion, which involved craft stores from two different chains, and one independent. Our goal was to find crafting nirvana; a store full of new and fantastic things to thrill customers. A retailer who had broken through the "buy-the-fixtures, set-the-shelves, and-pile-the-stuff-out" mantra that seems to be today's norm.

In the first store we found vanilla gondolas full of vanilla merchandise. What were we supposed to make with this stuff anyway? There were no displays, models, or signs to show us what to do or why we needed to do it. We also found lots of vendor-supplied fixturing. Sometimes these racks were correctly used, and sometimes they were just too good to throw away.

This store was clearly in the midst of an identity crisis. Except for the sign over the front door, there was nothing to tell us where we were. Everywhere we looked we saw vendor logos on vendor-supplied signage. We could tell you every line they carried, but we would be hard-pressed to tell you the name of the store.

Has your store become victim to the Brand Snatchers? If more than one customer a day asks for your store's name before writing a check, then you need to rely less on vendors, and focus on recapturing your own identity.

From a distance, the second store looked neat and well-merchandised, but closer inspection told the real story. Nothing made sense. Adjacencies like those belong in a close-out store.

We watched associates restocking shelves and ignoring bin tickets. New merchandise was being placed in the right departments, but not necessarily in the correct place. We could see it made no sense to the associates, who never could find anything we asked about.

At the third store, we found a

comatose staff. They couldn't even be bothered to look up and say, "Look around, help yourself." We walked around for a half an hour before anyone even acknowledged our presence. Not that it mattered, because we asked three different people about three different crafts and each time were basically told, "I don't know. I don't really know how to do this stuff." No one offered to find someone who could.

We can't place all of the blame with the salespeople because this store's owner created the culture that had lulled them to sleep. It is management's responsibility to make sure customers come first.

We know it isn't always easy to motivate your people to put customer service first, but we know it's possible. Set a standard, communicate it to your team, then become relentless about implementing it. Customer service is the competitive battlefield of the future. If you don't do it well, you lose. Period.

We didn't set out to look for negatives – we would much rather celebrate success. And like most customers, we prefer to shop in stores full of exciting merchandise, staffed by people who are glad that we're there.

It doesn't matter how good you are, we all need a wake-up call every once in a while – a kick in the pants that pulls us out of the ruts we get stuck in. Consider yourself kicked. ♦

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