



# Misplaced marketing

## “Dumbth” adventures in retailing

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**Keywords** *Service quality, Customer satisfaction, Employee attitudes*

**Abstract** *Discusses the growing problem of poor customer service due to the unskilled personnel that are employed. Provides anecdotal evidence of service encounters where the experiences of the customers were unsatisfactory. Expresses the concern that the orientation has shifted from the customer to the employees.*

### Modern culture

In the popular book, *Dumbth*, entertainer Steve Allen (1989) complains of an apparent dumbing down of modern culture, how intellect does not seem to matter, and how many people do not seem to care. To make his case, he lists many such examples, from directory assistance telephone operators who have never heard of Chicago, hotel desk clerks who cannot get straight his request for a wake-up call, cab drivers who cannot find a location that is virtually around the corner and book store employees who have never heard of great authors or their most famous works. However, in every example, the more basic marketing perspective says that we must wonder why these people remain employed when they lack the basic knowledge to do the job and are therefore unable to serve customers. Sometimes even the managers act with their own brand of misplaced marketing inanity, possessing an orientation toward serving the employees instead of customers.

Books-A-Million is a modern super-bookstore that has brought price competition to US book retailing. Akin to a general discount store, it possesses a large inventory of books on a variety of topics, more magazines than most news-stands, and some even have a play area where children can romp while parents shop. But with television sets blasting amid the magazine displays and tables stacked in disarray with piles of discount books, you have to wonder if anyone there cares about the product. This negative impression is reinforced by a realization that the clerks often seem to be literacy impaired.

### Illiteracy

The various sections each say that the books are “alphabetical by author”, but they are not. The science fiction area displays authors with names A, B, and C, then, since one author whose name begins with C also wrote a book related to the television show *Babylon 5*, all other books based on that show go next, regardless of the authors’ names. Then to D, E, G, F and H and with all books on “Highlander” in keeping with an author in the H group who wrote on that. After that, any resemblance to the alphabet is an accident. More than once, I tried to point out the browsing problem to a clerk, but the clerk would go to the shelf and say “D, E, G, F, H . . . seems okay to me”.

Several years ago, a customer in a Kroger food store asked for two-thirds of a pound of sea food at the fish counter. Amazingly, the 20-something college student counter clerk said, “My machine only reads decimals, not fractions”. Yet while the clerk was unable to do basic arithmetic, it is more inexplicable

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## Customer information

that, when receiving the complaint, the manager asked the customer to leave the store because such criticisms were rude to the work-incompetent employee. To the chain's credit, when it heard of the story from a customer letter, the manager was removed and the clerk was sent to "retraining". Still, one has to wonder about the original training program that produced a store manager who was more concerned with the worker's self-esteem than her inability to do the job measuring products for the customers.

Sometimes the managers confuse customer information with work rules, with a result working to the detriment of serving customers.

Retail stores have some basic items of information for customers, such as hours of operation. Retail businesses post their hours of operation so customers know when they are open: few experiences generate greater ire than travelling to a location and finding the doors locked. Posted hours say "Come here at 10.15 tomorrow morning and we'll be open". But at some point, the retail culture turned the information into a rule for customers to follow and tossed marketing out of the window in the process.

Your wristwatch says 10.03, but the door is still locked. At the store or bank, there are people inside ready to work and they are waiting until their master clock says exactly 10.00 to allow them to open the doors. They are visible through the windows; prospective customers see them and could only think, "What are they doing in there?" At the other end of the day, at ten minutes before closing the manager begins to dissuade new people from entering, so all business can be completed at exactly closing time. There is no harm in opening a few minutes early or closing late if customers are there, except that it might mess up the manager's sense of decorum and cost a few extra minutes to pay a clerk. If they are ready early, the managers can open early without any harm except to those silly minds that changed the consumer marketing information into a foolish rule.

Similarly, at Bob's small family-run restaurant, he does not shift from serving breakfast to lunch until 11.00 am. A bigger operation might serve breakfast all the time, but with his limited staff and resources he can only juggle so much. When two people came in for lunch at ten minutes before the hour, the newly-hired waitress told them to come back later. Fortunately, Bob overheard, caught the customers before they went away muttering, gave them seats, served drinks and gave them some pretzels, explaining that serving the food might take a few extra minutes since it is the shifting time of the day.

## Intellect

Admittedly, the level of intellect needed for many basic retail jobs is going down. Cash registers do all the counting, barcodes remove the need to even read the price numbers, and in fast food restaurants the clerk hits a key with the product name instead of noting the price. Machines even say how much change to give the customer, assuming that there is no error in inputting the data. Yet, it is both perplexing and amazing when people retain jobs even when managers know the clerks cannot count change or measure products or read a label. The problems have also been increasing as all organizations report reductions in time or budgets allocated to employee training, such that it

is now more honestly stated in minutes instead of hours or days. The unfortunate result is that everyone in the store remains ignorant of how important marketing views get lost.

## Reference

Allen, S. (1989), *Dumbth*, Prometheus Books, Buffalo, NY.