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The Day I Became a Cashier Zombie

Welcome to retail hell

By Kat Avila | Web Published 10.19.2004

"Don't just stand around collecting dust, why don't you straighten up the Halloween display." - unhelpful manager



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It's not the sort of thing you want to hear when you're the only cashier up front - when normally there are two or three - and you're enjoying a rare lull after several hours of juggling customers on the telephone and at the register. Welcome to Retail Hell - the world of undertrained, under-appreciated, minimum wage-earning cashiers and retail salespersons. The jobs are easy come (because of the high turnover), easy go.

At some point in our lives, many of us will have worked at a department store, clothing store, shoe store, bookstore, or other retail store, usually as our first job or for supplemental income or as a transitional job between jobs. The entry-level wage is about \$7 an hour in the Los Angeles-area, and the job is usually part-time with no benefits except for an in-store merchandise discount. A high school diploma is often not necessary, with on-the-job training offered. In 2002, California was among the five top-paying states for cashiers and

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retail salespersons, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, probably due to union activity in particular retail sectors; San Francisco was among the five top-paying metropolitan areas nationwide.

"She's been here five weeks. She should already know this."
- unhelpful supervisor to a customer, within earshot of the chagrined cashier

Cashiers are sometimes trained haphazardly, then they are humiliated and yelled at by bad apple supervisors who have internalized these tactics from caveman parents and who believe abuse will produce a more effective employee rather than further, in-depth, standardized training. A cashier I know jokingly conducted an informal employee survey about a store procedure; she received a different answer from everyone as expected.

Devious customers - well-off and so-so - target inexperienced cashiers, by youth and gender, to force transactions through that an experienced worldly cashier wouldn't process, such as an unsigned credit card without photo i.d., expired coupons or discounts without the coupon ("I forgot it at home"), and abuse of the store's return policy. A customer who is either belligerent or too sweet is a warning that another cash register drama may be afoot.

"I'M in a HURRY!!!"
- unhelpful customer

If you want good service, be a good customer. Your emergency is not my emergency. Don't expect to be rewarded for your bad planning with faster service than the other customers are

getting. Yelling at the cashier will not work any better than it does for the supervisor. On the other hand, "flashing-red-lights-and-siren" customers won't hold up a line and play an attention-needing actor to a captive audience cashier.

Being a good customer can mean protecting yourself by estimating in advance how much you will owe. Watch the monitor as purchases are rung up, especially for merchandise on sale as the regular prices may be pulled up instead by the computer. Review your receipt before you sign off on a credit card payment or before you leave the register area.

If you have to vent about the store or store policies and procedures, ask to speak to a supervisor or manager. Your huffy "I'm not shopping here any longer!" is meaningless to a minimum-wage employee who may be fed up with the place as well. Additionally, the cashier or retail salesperson may not have the skills or training to stay objective with a fuming customer and may exacerbate the situation by taking it personally or not acknowledging your anger and needs.

"Where's (name of cashier who has wandered off again)?"
- abandoned cashier

The computer isn't registering the sale price. My old eyes can't read the magazine prices printed in 6-point type. That teacher/homeschooler is abusing the educator's discount and is doing it in front of her children. This has no price tag. Those register forms are on order. We're out of the smaller bags. You gotta

pen I can borrow? I have to call a supervisor just to use the toilet. And here come those junior high boys who took the wrap off the Penthouse and left it wide open last time. CAN I GET SOME HELP OVER HERE?!!!

Ah, the day-to-day reality of serving humanity.

Kat has just finished reading Jeff Gee and Val Gee's "Super Service: Seven Keys to Delivering Great Customer Service - Even When You Don't Feel Like It, Even When They Don't Deserve It," McGraw-Hill, (c) 1999.

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