

Isn't the customer always right?

The green scarf looked great on me and how it brought out the colour in my eyes. At this bargain price I continued going through the rack to see what else I could find. I came across a fabulous brown one which I just had to have. And why buy two when you can have three I thought - no wardrobe is complete without a beige colour.

As I bounced up to the cash register with my great finds I remember talking to the young Asian girl about what a great buy the scarves were. She seemed to agree that they were good value for money.

As I was driving home I thought about all the clothes I could wear my scarves with and as soon as I got there I did a little fashion parade.

When I was filing the visa receipt, in with the mountain of other receipts, I realised I had been charged for four scarves not three. Although it was less than ten dollars I intended to go back to the store for a refund.

I'm one of those people who will go back to a grocery shop if I've been overcharged for an item, no matter how inexpensive it is. It's a principle thing I tell myself as I spend more money in petrol to return to the shop than the overcharged item cost me.

When I returned to the store for a refund I explained to the girl on the register what had happened. She called over the Manager. He looked me up and down and then told the cashier to go look through the video footage recorded the night I purchased the item.

This was a new experience. I spent my time waiting for the girl to return by shopping around. When she came back she said I had purchased something in a box which must have been the extra cost. I had no recollection of any such item so she invited me into the back of the store to view the footage myself.

Never one to let go of something once I start it, I followed the girl into the small room at the back. Up she got on a chair so she could reach the TV screen which was high up on a shelf. She fast forwarded through the footage until I could see myself at the counter paying for the purchases. As I watched the video I noticed two things, the first was that the unexplained item was in fact a box of tissues and second was that I looked around 10kg heavier on camera.

It was difficult to see exactly how many scarves I was buying so rather than take my word for it, we had to look at footage from not one, not two, but three camera angles. I assured the woman I wasn't trying to rip the store off for a few dollars – I really did only buy three scarves.



She said she believed me but continued to rewind the footage until around 15 minutes had passed.

I guess I could understand her suspicion if I looked like I hadn't showered or eaten in a week, or if I had red eyes and slurred speech but here I was in my corporate suit looking like I should be shopping at DJs rather than a bargain store.

We then returned to the Manager who reluctantly decided to refund my money. As he was handing it over I could see a suspicious look in his eye, worried I had somehow deliberately stood in a way that made it difficult for the cameras to see how many scarves I had purchased.

When I got back to work I told my colleagues what had happened. Some supported me in going back to get a refund while others thought I was mad.

As I finished telling my sorry saga I found that other people had stories to tell as well. The most interesting was from a colleague who had been a customer of a local gift store for many years but had recently had a fall out and refused to go back.

It all started when she saw an item that she had on lay-by but which was much cheaper in a different store. When she told the daughter of the owner of the gift shop about her find she was expecting they would match the price, especially as she considered herself a valued customer for many years.

As soon as she asked the question 'will you match the price' the owner's daughter, who had always been so friendly, became icy toward her. "If you don't want to match the price can I have a refund so I can buy the cheaper item?" my colleague enquired. "I'll have to phone my mother," was the gruff response.

She was told she could have a refund but she was going to lose 20 per cent for cancelling the lay-by. But 20 per cent worked out to be \$60 which defeated the purpose of getting the cheaper item.

"I have been a customer of this store for many years and I've spent thousands of dollars here. It won't cost you anything to give my money back, you will get to keep the item which you can sell to someone else for the price you want and I, who happens to be a loyal customer of yours, will get to save some money."

The owner and her daughter would not budge so they lost that customer and with her the potential for many more sales.

According to some people bigger stores and national chains value the customer more than smaller stores.

"They are much more willing to exchange, refund or price match than smaller businesses," said one of my friends who is a regular shopper.

But good customer service is not only confined to big business. Another colleague told me about a nursery in Jerrabomberra who had gained her loyalty by a simple act of kindness. My colleague was whining about how she was not able to grow camellias no matter how hard she tried. She wanted to know what the secret was.

The owner of the nursery went out the back and returned with a healthy looking



camellia which he gave her for free. "If this one dies then it doesn't matter cause you didn't have to pay for it," he said.

She has a big house with many bare garden beds and because of this one act of good will she has decided to buy all her plants and garden needs from this business, rather than go to bigger nurseries where she would most likely get what she wants for cheaper.

Her positive story about the nursery has made others consider visiting the store. Word of mouth is a powerful tool and it can either help build a profitable business or help break one.

According to Alan Fairweather, author of *How to get More Sales without Selling*, too many suppliers give customers the impression they don't care about repeat business. He says that customers leave a business for a few basic reasons, some because they are dissatisfied with the quality of the product or service, a small proportion leave because of price, but the vast majority leave because of supplier indifference.

Remember the good old days when the local shop owner knew everyone of his customer's names and birthdays. In this technology era how much easier is it now to become more customer-centric, building databases that contain vital information about their customers.

Good business people know that the relationship between happy customers that come back again and again are the ones who help create long term, sustainable profitability.

So in a world where consumers continue to tell stories about their retail experiences maybe store owners should make it their business to know how to build relationships with customers if they want to gain loyalty, repeat business and greater profits.

