



## Mystery shoppers reveal the top gaffes by retail salespeople.

It's been more than two years since the SNEWS® team first ventured out into the world of retail to launch its now revered and sometimes feared series of Mystery Shoppers. Our mission: To go shopping—undercover, of course—and to find out what's really happening behind the doors on Main Street America. With Get Smart shoe phone in place and beam-me-up-Scotty transmitters in hand (in case we're recognized, you know), team members have been sent into stores far and wide, shopping for everything from backpacks and paddles to watches and snowshoes.



# bad behavior

BY THERESE IKNOIAN

We were hoping for enlightening, give-me-10, yeah-babee experiences. Sigh. It can be dark in the real world. Not only are general rules of retail salesmanship routinely violated (no, you should not answer your cell phone when you are with a customer), but rules of plain ol' niceness and politeness that your Momma taught you were ignored (yes, you should smile, say hello and greet somebody).

Not that we haven't found gleaming beacons of stellar customer service and salesmanship. Oh, we did. So good that we have nearly leapt into a salesperson's arms in a celebratory dance as if the person had just made the game-winning touchdown. But we have also had far too many gloomy shopping adventures for today's changing retail world where customer service is No. 1. The hard, cold truth is that so-so service won't cut it with shoppers these days. Consumers expect—no, demand without equivocation—sublime customer service and skills. The second annual National Retail Federation/American Express Customer Service Survey, released in November 2006, found that consumers require flexible, friendly and efficient salespeople—and they are making decisions about where to shop and buy based on the level of service. Even more so in the specialty arena. In the survey, specialty stores were only second to restaurants as the places where consumers demand great service. Of 8,001 shoppers polled, 85.8 percent expected “good” or “excellent” service at specialty stores, just two points below that of restaurants at 87.9 percent, and way ahead of expectations at the next closest (department stores, 77.7 percent) of eight retail segments.

“Great service is not simply smile-training and free gift-wrapping,” stated a National Retail Federation White Paper called “Challenges of the Future: The Rebirth of Small Independent Retail in America” ([www.retail-revival.com](http://www.retail-revival.com)). “Rather, it is providing the customer with a subtle mix of product knowledge and personalized care. Only at this higher level can it be a differentiator for small independents.

“While providing good customer service is a historical differentiator for small independents and still a primary way to compete against larger competitors, the promised land of achieving the kind of service levels that delight customers day in and day out is often a mirage. There is a very serious gap between the promises of great service and the reality of what customers experience every day.”

With the growing and unabated demand for over-the-top customer service, SNEWS®, in partnership with GearTrends®, has decided to take a quick look at the top gaffes in our Mystery Shopping adventures to date. (You can find all our Shoppers, both outdoor and fitness, at [www.snewsnet.com](http://www.snewsnet.com) in the

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Training Center.) One can list a litany of faults we've experienced in our Shoppers, but when you dig deeper, many come down to not heeding these simple words of advice: Ask, then listen. Try to understand. And focus.

"The question is always, what is most important to the customer," said Tony Enrico, president of Impacting Futures (www.impactingfutures.com), a leadership and business development consultancy, and co-author of "Championship Selling."

### SAY HELLO

We're so embarrassed to even mention this one, it's so simple. Yet the number of stores where a salesperson is glued to a seat behind a counter in the back, on the phone, or yapping with a colleague while ignoring the customer is bleak. So we'll say it: Within a minute or two, get up out of your chair, come out from around the counter, and say hello. We also really like somebody with a logo on their shirt or, even better, a name tag. That way you know the person actually works there. One of our Mystery Shoppers had to circle an area for 10 minutes and practically do a tap dance on a counter (sign overhead read "customer service," no less) to finally get the attention of the person standing there busy at the computer. Gee, can somebody help us?

Also helpful would be coming up with some kind of innovative opener other than Wal-Mart's standard, "May I help you?" Maybe notice something about what the customer has on or seems to be looking at. Mention the weather. OK, it may be silly, but everybody is really into weather. If nothing else, you have made friendly contact and the customer will either then allow you to get into a conversation or will say, "I'm just looking." In either case, you've made the connection and the person will now feel more comfortable approaching you for help later once he or she has looked around. Or you can, after the small-talk about weather, get right into qualifying questions.

### ASK EFFECTIVE QUESTIONS

Above all else, this is the area that seems to cause the biggest stumble in our Mystery Shopping experiences. Basically, it's just about being real, being interested, asking intuitive questions and poking around underneath the first answers to get to more depth.

Selling is not about a monologue. It's a probing dialogue with that person who has come into the store looking for something. That "something" the person says he or she is looking for may not really be the tangible

STUFF you are selling—such as a daypack, a chronograph watch or a warm fleece. It may in fact be an answer to something else going on in their lives, such as the need to meet new people, lose weight or challenge themselves in new ways. They may in fact also need something other than what they say they are there looking for.

"There are fundamentally two levels to the probe. The first level is intellectual inquiry. Questions salespeople ask revolve around specs, features, product comparisons, how specific features work, etc." explained Enrico. "The second level of probing goes much deeper and links to emotional 'pains' the customer is feeling. These are the real reasons why customers buy. The salesperson must uncover the deeper-seeded issues, goals and objectives the customer has. What often happens is an average sales professional captures a few intellectual answers while doing an average to sub-par probe and immediately moves into the product presentation."

The questions you ask shouldn't be leading either, such as, "So you want a jacket for a higher aerobic activity," as we were asked in one Mystery Shopper. That could mean different things to different people, so just ask for an example of what the person is going to do and then let them talk.

### LISTEN!

Now that we've harped about the questioning, the next part is all about what comes after asking a question: listening. That means really focusing on the words, the body language, the hand gestures, the emotions, and what the person is saying as well as what they are NOT saying.

"If you see your neighbor at the store, and the person stops to tell you her son is having trouble in school and she just doesn't know what to do, how do you respond?" asked Tom Richard, an Ohio-based sales trainer who gives seminars, runs sales meetings and provides sales coaching (www.tomrichard.com). "Intuitively, you are extremely focused because you understand that your neighbor is revealing something personal and private to you. She looks to you because she is hoping that you can give her some friendly advice about what she could possibly do. You find yourself intuitively listening, asking questions to get more information, and building careful rapport."

Assumptions about the person based on what they say, what they are wearing, their gender, or how they look are to be avoided. In one of our fitness Mystery Shoppers, a male shopper was looking for some strength-training equipment. Did the sales-

person probe enough to find out about his bad back or space requirements? Nope. Instead, the salesperson assumed that since he was a guy, a beefy kinda guy, that he wanted "to get ripped" using a weight bench. No matter what our Shopper said, the salesperson didn't hear what he wanted.

### AVOID SELLING ON PRICE

The shopper has not come to your store to find the cheapest thing that exists. If that were the case, the person would have gone to the local discount, surplus or warehouse store. There are other things a specialty store can offer, and it's up to the salesperson to find out what tweaks the person and then offer it. We have experienced a Mystery Shopper adventure where the salesperson showed us the cheapest item in a category and, no matter how much we queried about the higher-priced models and why they cost more, he would only say they had "more bells and whistles" and never tried to sell them to us.

As SNEWS® wrote in its Training Center piece in November 2006, "How to sell higher price points" (find it at www.snewsnet.com/trainingcenter, under Fitness How to Sells): "Selling value added is all about identifying something that is of value to your customers and that they are willing to pay more for. Your job as a salesperson is to determine what is important to them and how much more are they willing to pay." The piece goes on to discuss how getting permission to show a customer the highest-priced items first, rather than the lowest, can help pin down what's important to the person and why.

Added Enrico, "Rarely is a purchase decision solely based on price. Many salespeople will tell you that everyone wants to drop to the lowest price. That is simply not true. If great value is created during the probe and presentation, and a trusting relationship is continuing to develop, customers are very willing to entertain a creative offer."

### KEEP THE PLACE TIDY

Last but certainly not least, who wants to trip over boxes, maneuver around stacks of shoes waiting to be shelved, be grossed out at ripped carpet, or be asked to look at accessories on dusty shelves or in smeared cabinets? If you are a specialty store, then looking the part is also vital to winning in today's retail world. 🏪

» Stay tuned for more Mystery Shoppers from SNEWS® at [www.snewsnet.com/trainingcenter](http://www.snewsnet.com/trainingcenter). You never know when you might find yourself or your store in the spotlight.

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