ARE YOU BEING SERVED?

By Laura Pratt, Freelance Journalist

Jim Davidson and I are a modern, acquisitive couple with two kids, a rambunctious dog and a loyalty to stick shifts. And we're looking to get a new set of wheels—or, at least, we're pretending to be. He's a professional mystery shopper, I'm a journalist; we're on an undercover mission to discover the best and worst of customer service in Canada.

Among our first stops is a German auto dealership in northwestern Toronto. We linger in the showroom alongside a retro coupe whose back end has been tricked out with a videogame console, awaiting attention for way too long before the receptionist assures us that she'll track a salesperson down. When another five minutes pass without anyone materializing, we bail, heading for a rival dealership that might be more willing to make a $30,000 sale.

Such an experience would irk even the most patient of consumers. To the owner of the business offering it, the scenario must be infuriating. And, judging from the findings of our up close and personal survey of customer-service quality, most Canadian entrepreneurs have cause for concern. Many should be spitting mad. And some wouldn't be able to stomach the treatment their employees give the greatest asset of every business: paying customers.

Full disclosure: we went into this quick-and-dirty assessment presuming we'd uncover a scene characterized by profound mediocrity. It wasn't long before we found our hypothesis borne out. But some of our encounters, in contrast, exemplified the kind of service that generates sales, loyalty and positive word of mouth.

What makes the difference between the good and bad? Don't be too quick to blame the staff—because where front-line service falters, there's often a front-office cause.

Can't you see that I'm ignoring you? In some jobs, employees have no choice but to connect with customers. In others, such as retail, employees have the option to ignore the client. Such is the case at a high-end furniture and housewares chain, where the first employee Davidson and I encounter looks at us but pretends not to have seen us. There are shopping baskets to be had, but they're not well displayed; we don't even know such things are available until a knot of female staffers disentangles itself from the shower curtains long enough to acknowledge us. Even after that intervention, we wander among the singing tea kettles and stainless-steel ice buckets for several minutes before someone else asks about our needs.

Such inattentiveness was irritating enough a generation ago. But the faster pace of everything today means that customers are more impatient than ever, says Davidson, principal of Markham, Ont.-based Competitactics, which conducts undercover customer service audits for organizations of all stripes. Agreed, no one wants to be stalked by white-collar salespeople, store clerks or customer-care agents. But making customers feel ignored is worse. In the retail context, for instance: "Just acknowledge customers," advises Davidson. "Say hello and let them know of your presence—and do it quickly."

If you won't help me, can I help myself? Davidson and I are well served after our extended tour of the aisles, with a pair of employees dedicating themselves to tracking down catalogues and price lists for the patio furniture we seek for our make-believe deck. But we invest several minutes agonizing over our

two-dimensional options in front of a computer screen with a cashier who fails to mention, until late in our machinations, that there are more examples of furniture on display on the second floor. Oops.

The fiscal reality of contemporary commerce requires most companies to run a zone defence rather than play man-to-man. But they can fill the gaps in their coverage by facilitating self-service, to which more of today's tech-savvy consumers and business purchasers are accustomed. Such tactics can be dead simple. In the furniture store, says Davidson, "There's nothing on the main floor to suggest that there are more outdoor tables upstairs. A tabletop sign would have sufficed." Even better would be a computer kiosk that allows shoppers to search for products by keyword, with product photos provided and a store layout on which the items are mapped.

"If someone's wandering through a store where the salesperson is occupied with someone else, they'll leave," says Davidson. "But if there's a mechanism through which they can easily find what they're looking for, they'll feel better served."

Customer service is not my job. At a major electronics store, we're on the hunt for one of those newfangled gadgets that tie the Internet to our 60-inch plasma TV, allowing us to reduce our reliance on the cable and satellite-TV companies. As is typical of big-box landscapes, it takes a muscular campaign to attract the attention of a salesperson. Once he's finally on the scene and aware of our desires, he tries to demonstrate the Boxee Box media player. But he can't find the remote control for the display model. So, we have to imagine the product in action, inspired by some spinning icons and a semi-apologetic explanation of what should be happening onscreen. A useful demo, it seems, will have to wait for the remote control to reappear on its own recognizance.

The effort is no better at a hardware megastore, where Davidson and I enter at the garden centre. After tiptoeing over a coiled rubber hose laying in the aisle, we ask the nearest employee where we can find toilet levers. Rather than walking us to the target display, she offers up directions that send us into the bowels of the expansive store. Her instructions turn out to be correct, but it takes two passes in front of the dangling lever displays before we spy the things.

Such insufficient employee effort pervades the retail sector. But it's regularly displayed by the staffers of inbound call centres, service desks and reception areas, too. Why? Many front-line service positions are filled by part-timers, seasonal workers or people between "real" jobs. As such, they have little internal motivation to excel at their work; not getting fired is enough to pay the bills and put another paragraph on their resumé. Sigh.

But it's in the enlightened self-interest of employers to make itinerant employees put more stock in their current roles. "You need to make employees aware that, while this might be a stopping point for them, the skills they're learning can be adapted to other situations," says Davidson. "Any kind of job has customer service attached to it."

The trick to engendering this kind of commitment? Give employees a sense of pride that will be reflected in their dealings with customers. And if all else fails, incentive pay can move the service needle.

Loose lips sink ships—and sales from the looks of everyone else standing around a self-service bike-rental terminal outside the Toronto Eaton Centre, they're as confused as I am by the signage explaining the pricing for the three-month-old service. That judgment is legitimized later on by the customer-service rep I reach by phone to complain about the outrageously high charges applied (hypothetically, that is) to my credit card.

Since the company launched in Toronto at the start of May, the phone agent confides, enough people have lodged similar complaints about unexpected charges that a full refund is automatic for first-time complainants. Indeed, he says, I did have access to the bikes for 72 hours, as I had understood, but unless I checked them into their docks every half-hour, I would be charged $6 per 90 minutes until, presumably, my credit card was maxed out.

"We get a lot of calls like yours from people surprised when they get their credit-card bill," he cheerfully offers. Indeed, they don't have enough customer-service reps, he adds, to cope with all the complaints. That's why my earlier angry email had been ignored, he says, and why the company is in the process of hiring for this part of its operation.

Davidson has been listening in on another line. Even though the rep solved my problem and was pleasant throughout the encounter, Davidson gives him a failing grade. It turns out mystery shoppers and legitimate customers aren't the only ones testing your employees.

"The competition always wants to find some customer-service rep who's going to reveal gaps in service," Davidson explains. "This guy just told us they're going to hire more customer-service reps rather than work on the system. From a competitive-intelligence standpoint, this would serve as great information because it would reveal this company's flaw."

More than that, he points out, this employee's easy disclosure about his organization's trouble spots does nothing to enhance the firm's image or its customers' confidence. "If I'm spending my money on something, I want to feel I'm getting something good," says Davidson. "But if the employee is bitching about it, I probably won't feel that way."

I'll make you wish you'd never called Even if your call-centre agents aren't giving away your trade secrets, they are almost certain to be making simple mistakes that have two effects on customers: decreased satisfaction and increased blood pressure. In many instances, the cure is a more thorough process review and design.

When Davidson calls an appliance manufacturer to discuss the burn marks appearing inside the door of his six-month-old microwave, it's not long before an error is made: the operator doesn't ask for a contact number should the call get disconnected. "People get cut off from customer-service calls all the time," says Davidson. Asking for a contact number should be part of the agent's script.

Next mistake: after 20 minutes on the phone with two individuals, Davidson is assured that "someone from tech support will call back in 24 to 48 hours." It's a good thing he inquires as to whether he should expect a Sunday call. "That's 24 to 48 business hours," the agent clarifies. "We don't call on the weekend."

It's essential that customer-service reps provide wholly accurate information, both to satisfy the customer now and to avoid a blow-up later. "Part of that is just being on the ball," Davidson admonishes. "If their computer system doesn't recognize that it's a Friday and prompt the operator to figure the weekend in to its predicted call time, then the system isn't working."

Yet another error: failing to diagnose the customer's real need early in the conversation in order to route the call appropriately. "Talking to someone for 20 minutes before finding out they're not the right contact is frustrating," Davidson says.

Both employees and managers need to look at their business with a critical eye. By calling in to test the phone system for a customer-service number, they can

get a feel for the client experience. Try out multiple scenarios, says Davidson, and be aware of the roadblocks the system reveals: "If I punch this and then that, what will happen? The more barriers [that are] up, the more likely it'll be that the customer goes somewhere else."

Cultivating a culture The news from the front lines of customer service isn't all bad. Our sales rep at the high-end menswear store we visit to find a suit for an upcoming wedding is excellent. He spends great swaths of time with us, first eyeballing my companion and choosing a well-sized suit jacket for him to shrug on. Next, the rep acknowledges that, no, the lighting isn't very good in front of the mirrors and that distinguishing black from navy beneath it is, yes, difficult. Then, he lays out jacket, shirt and tie combinations across a glass tabletop in a conscientious, deeply indulgent manner that makes a fella feel like he's being gift-wrapped.

Along the way, the salesperson offers copious helpful context, including a historical explanation for the double-breasted jacket and cuffed pant partnership, commentary on David Letterman's evolving sartorial style and a spirited argument for why purple is the colour of the season.

"I've never had a bad experience at this store," says Davidson. "This kind of service is just part of the company's culture." The key to building and maintaining a service-oriented culture in your business, he says, is to define what you want and take great care to assess the fit of every potential new employee.

The big problem with small imperfections When we arrive at the second auto dealership on our customer-service tour, we're approached by a salesperson—we'll call him Ted—who's fitted with a white company golf shirt and the confident air of a veteran of his trade. He offers coffee with milk before probing us on our automobile requirements. Such a "needs assessment," says Davidson, is a crucial step in the sale of big-ticket items.

After contemplating and then rejecting one truck model, we allow ourselves to be nudged toward the automaker's bestselling car, which we're assured is one of "the best four-cylinders [the company] has ever built." It accounts for 35% of the dealer's sales, says Ted, before inexplicably disappearing and leaving us to

Outstanding customer service has always been a top priority of Dan (pictured) and David Stezenko of Thunder Bay Ontario's award-winning Quality Market.

ponder in the dealership's "sweet spot." It's the physical part of a car showroom, Davidson explains, where voices carry the most effectively. By conversing here, would-be purchasers unwittingly share their thoughts with all the sales folks listening in.

Ted returns at last and, without asking for a driver's licence that might legalize such an outing, we take a 2011 model for a test drive. But the trip is largely silent, Ted clamming up, presumably, to give us a chance to consider our experience. "That was unfortunate," reports Davidson, when we unload. "He missed that chance to provide further details that might have clinched a sale."

With a real customer, that small mistake might have cost the dealership a $20,000 sale and thousands of dollars' worth of high-margin service revenue - further proof that customer service matters, big time—and that the gap between bad and good service is narrow enough for every company to fill.

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Jim Davidson, principal of Competitactics, is a frequent speaker at business conferences on the topics of competitive intelligence and strategic planning. In addition, he has designed and implemented customer satisfaction studies and mystery shopping exercises ranging from insurance to fast food. To stay ahead of the curve, Davidson is leading the development of a graduate program in business intelligence at Seneca College of Applied Arts & Technology. At Atkinson, York University, Davidson helped to develop experiential education.