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A Customer Confession

Ellen C. Wells



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I have something to confess: I ended 2018 taking part in a suspicious retail transaction. Gads, I know, I know. Me, of all people! In fact, I may have committed highway robbery, except it was in a strip mall, I wasn't wearing a mask and, truth be told, it wasn't my intention to commit anything except my duty to buy groceries.

Let me explain.

I was spending the New Year's holiday weekend with some friends in a small New England town. Cooking, eating, sharing some hearty laughs ... that sort of thing. We planned a huge feast for New Year's Eve, and on December 30 I found myself in the local chain grocery, reading the shopping list and dutifully checking off the items once they were secured. On that list was lobster—five or six of them total. I head to the fish department, ask for and receive five good-sized lobsters, and the fishmonger places them in two separate bags.

His scale spits out the price tag for each bag and he affixes them to the bags. And I'm on to the dairy department.

In the morning, our group is prepping that evening's meal. I pull out one of the two lobster bags from the fridge. We gingerly pull the lil' critters out of the bags and realize one fellow didn't make it through the night. Considering 14 people would be dining with us, we decided to be on the safe side, avoid any potential illness a dead lobster might cause, and return him for another.

I've never returned a lobster, have you? I didn't think about how they'd figure out how much this particular lobster cost, credit me for him, and then let me go get a suitable living replacement. And you know what? The lone clerk behind the customer service desk didn't think about it much, either. He simply scanned the tag and refunded me that price as he would with any return. Scan, bam, thank you, ma'am.

Mind you, there had been three lobsters in that bag. I returned one. Dead.

Sure, I probably should have said something. But thinking about the situation at the time—considering the service desk staffing level (just one busy guy), the clerk's detached demeanor, the mathematical hassle that might ensue and the fact that it was a giant chain store—I decided to just take the money and go. I then walked to my car, in a manner very much like the woman in that classic "Start the Car" IKEA commercial.

As small business owners and employees, you know exactly what went wrong here. The clerk empowered me to feel I could take advantage of the situation. There was nothing to connect me to the clerk, to have concern for what

might happen at the end of his shift, nothing that made me think, “Well, shucks, I can’t do this to this lovely business.” Am I cold-hearted? No (okay, maybe a little). But there was nothing for my heart to warm up to.

We’re getting close to seasonal hiring season. The front line staff—the clerks, runners, waterers, bench stockers, car loaders and all the others—have the most important jobs in your company. You business owners and top staff might be the most recognizable faces, but keep in mind that it’s the front line staff your customers interact with the most. It’s not enough for the waterer to be able to hold a hose or the clerk to scan a pot. Do they have that certain *je ne sais quoi* that will make the customers you care about care about you?

As the applicants line up, ask yourself what you need to do this year to ensure the staff members have the personalities that represent you. Maybe it’s a different interview process, maybe it’s a little higher wage. Maybe ask them what they’d do if someone tried to return a lobster. **GP**