

the notorious h.m.p.

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Honorable Mention, Creative Non-Fiction

PROVIDING GOOD CUSTOMER SERVICE was my primary duty while working for Osco Drug Stores. I tried always to treat each person as I would want to be treated. As a shift supervisor, I tried to train my clerks to do the same. Maintaining a smile and pleasant attitude could be an arduous task. While a great majority of my customers were reasonable and some even quite lovable, there were, those who were problematic. Early on, I designated such customers High Maintenance Patrons, or HMPs for short. I later discovered that the bevy of HMPs could be sorted into three categories.

I call the first high maintenance patron "Penny Pincher." Penny usually has a fairly comfortable standard of living, often drives a luxury automobile, and dresses in designer label clothing. In spite of large disposable incomes, these HMPs will go to any length to save money, sometimes to their own discombobulating. One notorious HMP won the Lifetime Achievement Award for penny pinching. When I arrived at the photo counter, I found "Ms. Jones" seething incoherently. Ethan, the service clerk, who had reported for work that morning sporting a rather nasty sunburn, was now the pale hue of an Easter lily. Scattered like so much jetsam on the counter between the two of them were the pieces of a watch. Despite the jumble of nonsense tumbling from her lips, I was able to deduce what had occurred. "Ms. Jones" had come in to purchase a battery. Disregarding his explanation of company policy, and sensing his intimidation, she demanded that Ethan replace the battery in her diamond and platinum watch. Removal of the watch back allowed the springs and other parts to launch into the air. From the look on "Ms. Jones" face, I worried that she might send Ethan to an untimely grave in a similar fashion. Once she regained coherence, I explained to her that Ethan had resisted replacing the battery because he was not trained in watch repair. As delicately as possible, I inquired as to why she hadn't taken the watch to a jeweler. "I don't have time to fuss with a jeweler," she snapped. "Besides, they are too damn expensive." Wanting to resolve the issue quickly, I directed her to locate a jeweler who was able to make the repairs. My Christmas Bonus spontaneously combusted before my eyes when I assured her that the store would take care of the expenses. The cost of this time and money saving trip to the drug store was only starting to accrue, on the both the customer's ledger and the store's.

The "Heir-apparent" type of HMP often migrated into my stores during "Snowbird Season." Such HMPs presuppose that their status as winter visitors guarantee them the undivided attention of a personal shopper. "Farmer Thompson's" green John Deere cap, rumpled bib overalls, and look of superiority instantly betrayed him as an "Heir-apparent" the moment he walked through the front doors. My attempt to escape by ducking around the Charmin display was futile. "Excuse me young man, " he called. "I need help finding a few items." This kind of HMP never needs just a *few* items. A slew of items? Often. Stacks of items? Frequently. Scads of items? Not impossible. But a *few items*? Never. I slowed, twisted my face into a smile, and turned to accept my punishment for not fleeing to the stock room fast enough. Perhaps the gentleman believed he was back home shopping at Sam Drucker's

General Store because when asked if he needed my help he bowed gracefully and handed over a shopping list. My eyes bulged; the list contained enough items to have outfitted a wagon train coming West! Guiltily eyeing the "Count on people who care" button hanging on my vest, I took the list from him and hustled us through the store, overloading a shopping cart in the process. Throughout the painful encounter I prayed that I would be summoned away to deal with some important management duty, like refilling the paper towel dispenser in the men's room.

The worst sort of HMP was the "Drama Queen." Drama Queens escalate every personal inconvenience, no matter how trivial, into a full Shakespearean tragedy. One such importunate patron visited my store every Sunday. Her choice of wardrobe and predominately placed nametag signaled to all that she was on her way home from church. Sale paper in hand, she would promenade throughout the store, verifying that each item pictured was in stock. One particular day Her Majesty was on the lookout for caffeine-free diet soda. The sight of the already empty shelf stoked her furnace seven times hotter than usual and sent her ship barreling at full-steam to the customer service counter. Her barrage began with a question, "Don't you comprehend that you have an obligation to keep advertised products in stock!" Then came the threats, "I am going to contact the news media and let everyone know how you mislead customers." Then the martyrdom commenced, "This is a personal vendetta against customers with special needs." Finally, the tears gushed, "What am I going to tell Mother? She won't take her pills without Caffeine-Free Diet A&W Root Beer in the plastic bottles, This will simply kill her." When the tirade subsided, I explained that the distributor ran out of the product and that I was truly sorry for any inconvenience that it had caused her. I further offered that the only way I could have prevented this grievous act of false advertising would have been to rise at 3 a.m. and go about stealing all the Sunday newspapers in the neighborhood. She reluctantly accepted the offer of a rain check and exited stage left. Later that afternoon, as I was filing rain checks, I made an interesting discovery: The previous week the Queen Mum would only drink Diet Schweppes Ginger Ale in the can!

It has been my experience that High Maintenance Patrons can be sorted three ways, regardless of age, gender, or socio-economic status. Some of my colleagues eventually developed a strong distaste toward human beings as a result of working in the retail business. I, however, thrived on the challenge of delivering good customer service. The opportunity to observe the human species, and the many humorous anecdotes that I collected, were perfect compensation for the energy expended. Thank goodness there was some sort of payoff in the end. Lord knows I didn't make any money.

