
EDITORIAL POSTLUDE

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The Consumer as Serf

A few years ago, frustrated consumer Mark Evanier searched the different Los Angeles grocery stores in vain for a particular brand of orange juice. Stores would carry other products from the same company, but not the orange juice. As he was about to ask one store's manager for assistance, he noticed a sign above the podium saying, "If we don't stock what you want, we will be happy to special-order it for you." But when he asked the manager for a special-order, he was told, "We don't do special-orders. . . . It's just too much hassle." The manager apparently felt it was an adequate explanation to say that he didn't personally put the sign there, though he also admitted that he had been manager of that store for more than six years and had never made any special-orders, but had never felt compelled to take down the sign (Evanier 2003, 124–128).

When shopping for a new washer and dryer at Sears, I expressed the not-improbable concern that the products might go on sale right after we had them installed. But we were told not to worry, since we would be rebated the price difference if anything purchased went on sale for a lower price anywhere, at any competitor, in the following 30 days. Sure enough, toward the end of the month we spotted a sale at Sears for our exact item, getting to the store on our next available day. However, we were told we could not get the rebate because their sale had ended the day before—never mind that nowhere did the offer say we had to come in while a sale was in progress. We argued, but we were told we'd have to meet with our original salesman, who was off that day and whose return time was uncertain. We asked for the manager, but he refused to come out of his office, telling the salesperson on duty over the phone that she had to "make us understand" the apparently hidden terms of the rebate offer.

Many readers of *JCA* might have added another comment in an effort to gain cooperation from these store managers. University faculty often try to make a stronger case for better service when they mention how such a consumer-insensitive encounter would make for an interesting discussion topic in our classes. At the very least, the manager might fear a negative customer reaction from all those students, or so we hope, though I am re-

peatedly surprised of those times that managers respond to the frustrated consumers with their own strange efforts at retaliation.

Years ago, as the passengers milled around to beg, plead, or cajole access to a flight to get home after their assigned aircraft had mechanical problems, a less-than-service-oriented airline employee was visibly taking down names of the most disgruntled customers on his own list. People took down his name to complain to the company, yet he tried to intimidate everyone as he made it clear that he was taking down their names for reasons unknown. Around the same period, I sent information to a magazine about a clearly false advertising claim in their pages. I sent my letter on personal stationery and the business owner who was forwarded my letter from the magazine publisher made note of my campus-town home address and directed his own complaint to the magazine saying I was an “ignorant student” trying to “earn points in a marketing class.” (And he never did show how my evidence of false advertising might be in error.)

Today, if I send a letter of service complaint on university stationery to emphasize my interests as also related to lecture materials, I risk a response sent to my department chair or dean saying that I should not be allowed to criticize their fine company in my classes. My class comments on news reports of a deceptive advertising claim impelled two students to write letters to companies to ask for more information. In turn, I later received an envelope from the university provost forwarding a letter of complaint about my lectures that he had received from the company.

Most recently, one of the off-campus bookstores informed me that they had decided to order the newer edition of a textbook than the one I requested, even though the new book would not be delivered for my review until days before the semester started. As I replied with a note about my preferences for the prior edition which the publisher had already assured me was still available, I went a bit over the top, observing how their prices are higher than the other stores and that such non-service fits within the current discussion topic for my large-section undergraduate class. Within hours, the owner of the store contacted my department chair with complaints of harm to his business and threats to “seek action” against me in the office of the provost. I can only presume that, if I used my syllabus or web page to publicly provide students with information on my survey of local textbook prices, similar complaints and threats would probably arrive in the office.

While no Auburn University administrator has done more than forward the information to me as if it were a letter that accidentally had arrived at the wrong address, I would not be surprised if faculty at other schools

found their administrators to be less than supportive of academic freedom and consumer sovereignty. I have to wonder if companies have ever contacted the nonacademic employers of other consumers who register complaints.

The earliest consumer activists placed a strong emphasis on consumer information. Today, if the ability to complain is limited, and if companies are non-responsive to their customers, information on the Internet empowers people at least in their information search. Yet even here corporate power potentially subverts the consumers' interests. The most Internet-savvy people are unaware that companies can and do pay to be listed on search engines ahead of lower priced competitors (Guest 2003). When searching for the best price in rental cars, for instance, the initial screens are limited to certain companies and only with knowledge of various search tricks can you find the best deal (Consumerwebwatch 2003).

Shopping the old fashioned way for a new computer, television, DVD player, or pair of running shoes can result in buying out of exhaustion instead of confidence and knowledge. Finding a store that offers "the lowest prices" is easy. Many will proclaim, "We'll match anyone's price on the same model." The problem is that no two stores carry the exact same model, so direct comparisons are impossible. Even on the Internet, it is hard to find direct comparisons of the exact same product models. The first discount store has model #755. The second store has model #756 or #755-R. To make it more confusing, each minor change of numbers does not just increase or decrease in the quantity of special features, but instead, alters the overall option bundle. There is no way to directly compare one to the other. Driving from store to store, finding the same brands but a different array of model numbers at every location, the shopper gets increasingly confused and frustrated. Choice can't be based on price comparisons since the price and feature bundles are different. Since no two stores carry the exact same models, several different stores all are safe in making a "low-price guarantee."

Consumer Reports will provide information on different brand or product values, and even note a "best buy," but since they never tell you what stores carry that brand and specific model, it may never be found. Seeking a new CD player from a *CR* recommendation resulted in numerous hours traveling between different stores that only had similar models with added features and higher prices. We were about to give up when the recommended best buy was spotted by accident in the back of a locked display case at a Sam's Club.

In effect, we are living in cartoonist Scott Adams' view of the future in which capitalism shafts consumers by use of "confusopolies," systems of marketing that make it impossible for consumers to know what is going on (Adams 1997).

Economists say that prices and transactions are set by a meeting of supply and demand. But to an economist, reality is just a concept. I have a different model. As the consumer's time costs cut into potential savings from "smart shopping," the purchase actually is made at the store or Internet location where the confusion curve and the frustration curve meet at a point of relative psychological equilibrium.

Instead of losing to the power of monopoly, consumers lose to the power of a confusopoly. And if they are dissatisfied, they can try to complain.

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