

---

EDITORIAL POSTLUDE

---

HERBERT JACK ROTFELD

---

Depending on the Kindness of Strangers

---

Since the store is on the opposite side of town, the holiday gift certificate had been sitting for months. This meant that on a sunny spring day, I had an added excuse to ride my motorcycle home from the office via a slightly different route that took most of the afternoon instead of the usual 10 minutes, eventually stopping at the Big Swamp motorcycle store to redeem the card. Only after I entered the store did I realize that I did not have a pair of reading glasses with me. I selected a few pair of boot socks for the value of gift, but I couldn't read details on the wrapper about fabric content and I had to ask another nearby shopper if I had the display peg with my size. The woman who recorded the sale read the washing directions to me, since cleaning motorcycle clothes on gentle cycle was a mental misfit I wanted to avoid, also assuring me I had the same type of product as noted by the shelf label. Only when I got home did I realize that one pair was "youth" size, something that was written in small print on the package as well as on the unread receipt for the cash sale.

After taking another long-but-more-direct ride out to the store the next day, they were quite pleasant about making the exchange without problems and apologized for my needing to come out twice. As it turned out, they did not even know they had the youth size in stock. It was not ordered. Sent to them by mistake with an appearance like the regular product in all respects except for the small print size label on the package, they were just tossed on the display peg. Yet I had to go through the initial sale depending on other people in the store to spot that I was purchasing a product for myself in a size appropriate for small children.

My trust was minor, with the problem self-inflicted by my own failure to place a cheap pair of glasses in my pocket. Yet it drives home the ineluctable realization that everyone must constantly trust people they don't know, or some anonymous business computers they never see, to handle information

where mistakes could severely impact their health or wealth. While other areas where consumers must trust strangers can cause much greater harm, the actual errors could never as easily be discerned as clothing in the wrong size.

Consumers are prone to misunderstand the health value, or even health *risks*, of foods in restaurants (Burton and Creyer 2004). Some people who say that they don't want to overeat can't properly estimate how much is an appropriate serving portion (Bryant and Dundes 2005). A constant topic in the pages of *JCA* deals with the assumption that better education programs or more realistic government-required labels can handle some of these marketplace problems; many of the past few years' articles could be cited on consumer use or misunderstandings of available information (e.g., France and Bone 2005; Lee and Cho 2005). Greater financial literacy would help people handle money matters, or so we are often told (e.g., Fox, Bartholomae, and Lee 2005).

Yet this is not just an issue on the amount of information available, the format designated for presenting the information such as on a product label or whether people have the education to understand the information. Many times consumers have no choice but to trust that companies and their employees are not making mistakes.

In early 2006, after many universities issued their initial acceptance decisions to high school seniors, it was reported that misreading by scanners for the standardized tests had caused well over 4,000 students to have lower SAT scores. News stories focused on the outrage from parents or students who might have been rejected or wait-listed by their first-choice schools. Yet, the company could easily have tried to bury the error and not tell anyone about the mistake, since absent a whistle-blower no one could have discovered it.

In the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, the young George Bailey prevents a distracted pharmacist from accidentally filling a prescription with poison. Real-life prescribing errors would never be as deadly, but unless it is a frequently refilled order most patients could not tell the wrong pill from the correct one. Consumers trust pharmaceutical companies to report negative results from tests on product safety to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, or to at least allow the university professors who conduct the tests to freely publish those results so doctors might know about it. The FDA regulates the manufacturers' purity and quality of drugs, but the supplements often sold as "health food" go unregulated such that consumers must trust the manufacturer that the pills contain the promised concentrations of kava kava, melatonin, glucosamine, or other popular product. With numerous financial regulations for information disclosures for interest on savings or loans, the reality is that consumers get their notices from

the banks hoping that the total amounts calculated are correct. If they are not, few are capable of telling the difference. Rare is the person who can fully understand the basis for numbers on earnings statements or the money yet to be paid on a mortgage.

Admittedly, some consumer fears of corporate power are overblown and absurd, such as those that foolishly believe their decision-making abilities are directed by impossible powers of advertising mind control (e.g., Broyles 2006). However, where sanity prevails there do exist actual examples of marketplace abuses of consumers unable to know any better (e.g., Jae and DelVecchio 2004; Rotfeld 2005), and technology itself opens the door for potential abuses of even the most knowledgeable and cautious of people (e.g., Langenderfer and Linnhoff 2005; Stafford 2004). And like George Bailey's pharmacist, consumers must trust that honest businesses do not make mistakes.

Every so often I go into Wesley Tire and Auto Service with a list of things for them to check out on my car. "Repair as needed," I tell them. "Call me when you are done." They have proven themselves deserving of my trust many times. Yet, despite my mechanical ignorance, I have repeatedly been able to see that I found that rare commodity of an auto repair shop that leaves me worry free. Unfortunately, there is no way consumers can check out everything else in their lives.

## REFERENCES

- Broyles, Sheri J. 2006. Subliminal Advertising and the Perpetual Popularity of Playing to People's Paranoia. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 40 (Winter): 392-406.
- Bryant, Rachel and Lauren Dundes. 2005. Portion Distortion: A Study of College Students. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 39 (Winter): 399-408.
- Burton, Scot and Elizabeth H. Creyer. 2004. What Consumers Don't Know Can Hurt Them: Consumer Evaluations and Disease Risk Perceptions of Restaurant Menu Items. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 38 (Summer): 121-145.
- Fox, Jonathan, Suzanne Bartholomae, and Jinkook Lee. 2005. Building the Case for Financial Education. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 39 (Summer): 195-214.
- France, Karen Russo and Paula Fitzgerald Bone. 2005. Policy Makers' Paradigms and Evidence from Consumer Interpretations of Dietary Supplement Labels. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 39 (Summer): 27-51.
- Jae, Haeron and Devon DelVecchio. 2004. Decision-Making by Low-Literacy Consumers in the Presence of Point-of-Purchase Information. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 38 (Winter): 342-354.
- Langenderfer, Jeff and Stefan Linnhoff. 2005. The Emergence of Biometrics and Its Effect on Consumers. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 39 (Winter): 314-338.
- Lee, Jinkook and Jinsook Cho. 2005. Consumers' Use of Information Intermediaries and the Impact on Their Information Search Behavior in the Financial Market. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 39 (Summer): 95-120.
- Rotfeld, Herbert Jack. 2005. The Cynical Use of Marketing to the Unwitting Consumer. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 22 (2): 60-61.
- Stafford, Marla Roynce. 2004. Identity Theft—Laws, Crimes and Victims. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 38 (Winter): 201-203.