



By Kim Robinson

## The SMMarT Guy

# Waiting *for Service*

One recent Saturday, I went to the paint department of a big-box retail store with my daughter to buy paint for our guest room. Once we—no, she—finally decided on the color, I went to the counter to have it prepared. The small crowd waiting for service indicated we weren't the only ones who decided to paint that weekend. There were no stanchions placed for us to form an orderly line, nor was there a "take-a-number" box, so I asked the crowd for the last person in line and stood near him.

There were only two clerks and many of us waiting for service, so I knew I was in for a wait. After about 20 minutes, a woman who was ahead of me, and who was being helped by one of the clerks, stepped closer and whispered to me in an angry voice, "Did you see that?" She jerked her head to the left to indicate a woman who had just arrived. "We've been waiting forever and that woman just walked up and ordered from that other clerk. Can you believe it?" She then added as she stared daggers at both the offending woman and the clerk, "How rude."

I stepped up to the accused woman and asked if she had, indeed, just walked up and ordered. A bit nonplussed by my direct approach, she admitted she had and offered me a couple of lame excuses for her rude behavior: She thought it was a different line and/or she thought we had all been helped already. I pointed to the crowd that now stared at her and in a calm voice (really) told her that although she caught the clerk's eye when she walked up and he took her order, it was still rude of her to cut in front of us.

People like her think it's OK to cut in front of others because they believe their

time is more valuable than everyone else's. Such behavior is a character flaw and not one I can address because I'm not a psychologist, minister, or magician.

However, I do teach people in business about sales and customer service and how the two go hand in hand. That young paint clerk showed terrible customer service to all of us waiting in line when he took that woman's order out of turn. His actions will cost his employer sales because all of us who witnessed his action got a little ticked off, and angry shoppers do not return as often, or spend as much, as happy ones.

This scenario is repeated everywhere by all the clerks, agents, and customer service personnel who believe customer service starts and ends when the customer is at the cash register. They ignore line control and seem to believe the only difference between good and bad customer service is whether or not customers get a smile when they make their purchase.

They are all wrong. The difference between good and bad customer service also depends on treating everyone the same. No one likes to wait in line, and I am insulted when I see someone else being treated better by being allowed to cut in front of me. The best kind of front-line employee is one who smiles and practices line control. But, I'll take a frowning clerk who respects my time and won't let people cut in ahead of me over a smiling clerk who is oblivious to "who's next?" any day.

The woman who whispered to me about the line-cutter got her paint, thanked me for "saying something," and left very angry at the clerk and, by extension, the entire store.

When we customers wait in line, even with stanchions and numbered tickets, we expect to be treated fairly. We stand with our items or our questions and we look to the store to establish and maintain order so that no one gets special treatment. No one in line should have to "say something" to enforce order. That responsibility lies with the business.

Opposite my paint store experience was when I waited in a long line for an airline agent. I only wanted information, but right when I got to the head of the line to ask my question, a man approached from the side and interrupted my time with the agent to "just ask a question." The agent told him to go wait in line, and I loved him for it. ■

*Kim Robinson co-authored the book, Communicate Clearly, Confidently & Credibly, and he is the President of The SMMarT Consulting Group, Inc., a marketing, sales training & business development company. He can be reached at [Kim@SMMarTConsulting.com](mailto:Kim@SMMarTConsulting.com), or 515-223-5510.*

