

Is the customer wrong, or is the salesperson crazy?

Recently, there was a huge altercation between a customer and a clothing store assistant in Chapel St Prahran, the heart of Melbourne's elite shopping district.

The story goes that three women, part of a bridal party, were shopping for dresses associated with the big day. One of the customers claims a male sales assistant spoke to her rudely, allegedly barging into her change room and making disparaging remarks about her size 12 frame. The assistant then allegedly told the customers as they left the store "Have fun finding something at Supre!"

The customer wrote a letter of complaint and emailed it to store management. Had she received an acknowledgement of her distress, and some understanding of her experience from management, the situation would have ended there. However, the letter she received from store management supported the shop assistant's behaviour and further insulted her, referring to the assistant as a "retail superstar" who "knew you were not going to buy anything before you even left your house."

The behaviour of the sales assistant flies in the face of the well known 100 year old retail adage: *The customer is always right*. So is it true? Is the customer always right?

If you've ever worked in retail you know that the customer is certainly not *always right*. There are definitely some crazy shoppers out there. Equally, there appear to be some bizarre shop assistants out there too!

The most amazing part of this story is not necessarily what the shop assistant did, because as we've established, not everyone is well-adjusted. However, you'd expect the management team of a successful retail outlet to be of sound mind, at least in the business sense. Management's response to the

customer indicates that they were not fully aware of the potential PR disaster that could come of such a written correspondence. Gone are the days when any PR is good PR. Now, with the internet and social media, businesses can create and target their PR strategy at relatively low cost. We can easily create positive viral campaigns for our brand. We no longer need people talking about our brand at all costs, even if it's negative.

The customer was infuriated enough to post the store's response online. It quickly went viral, sending the store into a PR emergency situation. They shut down their social media publicity campaign and, using their operations manager, went into a whirlwind of television media appearances, trying to defend themselves further.

With each media appearance, the situation worsened. Quickly, online parodies and fake twitter accounts started emerging, with the sole aim of making fun of the store, its brand and its staff.

In the past, this unhappy customer would have told some of her friends, who would have told some of their friends and maybe, it would have reached 20 people. In reality, this story took less than one week to reach millions of people across Australia and worldwide. And the message projected about the store was overwhelmingly negative.

The store has still not resumed its social media campaigns, and new spoofs mocking the store appear online every day. This has not been a PR success for this store. It has been a lose-lose situation for everyone. The customer feels badly about herself

and her shopping experience, and the store has damaged their brand and image.

Had the store managed the situation with more compassion and business savvy, they would never have ignited such a firestorm.

So, what's the moral of this story? Todd Sampson, advertising guru, summed it up perfectly on *Gruen Planet* recently. He said "The customer may not always be right, but they are a broadcaster."

It's human nature to want to spread the bad stories. Those are the ones that will go viral online. As professional people, it's helpful to realise that any professional interaction can end up as an internet sensation and threaten the reputation of ourselves and our company. Maybe the customer in this story wasn't right. We don't know. But what we do know is that if the shop assistant was really a "retail superstar", he would have had the skills to manage the customer, make her feel like spending her money and ensure she tell all her friends about her great experience. A real retail superstar would have made the sale and found the win-win for both of them. 💡

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