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Retailers hope a little charm goes a long way

*The Boston Globe***By Beth Teitell, Globe Correspondent | August 14, 2008**

At Lord & Taylor, staffers invite special customers in on their birthdays for cake and fitting-room parties. Moxie, the fashionable Charles Street boutique, has started making home deliveries. Get your oil changed at Sullivan Tire and Auto Service, and expect a phone call within the week - and a free re-do if you're not satisfied. With the economy struggling, some retailers - emphasis on some - are turning up the charm.

"It's all about customer service these days," says John Miller, Sullivan Tire's metro Boston area representative. Miller's made some 2,000 calls since February and says most people are happy to hear from him. "They feel we care, which we do." But awkward situations are not unheard of. One man became suspicious when Miller rang asking to speak to the guy's girlfriend. "He thought we were calling for another reason, if you know what I mean," Miller recalls.

But Miller's motivation, like that of Lord & Taylor's staff, is simply an attempt to keep those scarce dollars coming in. "We're trying to make it a more meaningful experience," says April Stern Riccio, the chain's regional public relations director, explaining that the company has increased a customer outreach program that was instituted as part of a rebranding effort in 2007.

Loyal shoppers enjoy handwritten notes on their wedding anniversaries, and, of course, there's the cake, usually lemon with a light buttercream topping or chocolate with ganache. In July alone, Riccio crooned "Happy Birthday to You" in the Natick and Burlington stores, and in June a customer was feted in the Boston store. Riccio insisted customers didn't mind trying on clothing after downing cake. "It's just a sweet little piece."

Over at Moxie, owner Karen Fabbri says she's "looking for ways to give people fewer reasons not to shop." To that end, she and her staff have personally delivered a large Tory Burch leather and straw tote to the XV Beacon hotel (after a shopper liked the bag but hesitated because she didn't want to carry it around all day), and a pair of Spanx shapewear to an elderly customer on Beacon Hill.

"Hopefully, the next time, they'll remember this is the store that goes above and beyond," Fabbri said. "If you're a good person, hopefully you're doing things that give value to your customers."

But at what cost? Although good customer service distinguishes a company - which is why Barneys regularly sends handwritten notes thanking shoppers for even the smallest of purchases, and McCormick & Schmick's calls some diners afterward to make sure all was satisfactory, shoppers consistently name price as their top consideration. Many firms balk at the expense of training and high staffing levels.

"Most customers are not looking for the retailer with the best customer service, but the retailer with the best price," says Ellen Davis, a vice president at the National Retail Federation. Figures on customer service training costs are hard to come by, but a 2007 survey by the NRF found that 42 percent of retailers spend at least \$500 per employee per year on general training.

But skimping on customer service is shortsighted, says consumer psychologist Kit Yarrow, coauthor of "Gen buY."

"A lot of people look at customer service as an expense they can't afford," she said, "but there is a serious problem there." She points to a recent survey she conducted of 2,000 shoppers, in which consumers identified the "most irritating or annoying" aspect of shopping as "unfriendly or discourteous sales people."

"A down economy doesn't last forever," Yarrow says, "but a brand reputation does."

Even those trying to increase the wooing can find the job difficult. Chobee Hoy, of Chobee Hoy Associates Real Estate in Brookline, says she's always emphasized customer service and stresses it even more now. But, she says, "the hardest thing for a broker to do sometimes is to keep in touch with a buyer or seller. It's easy when everything is going beautifully, but when it's not, you almost feel afraid. Sometimes you get blamed for things you have no control over."

And the question has to be asked: Do the personal notes and cake really mean anything to people? Yes, says Robert Meyer, the chairman of the marketing department at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. "When you have the situation where the economy is going down and people are starting to worry about their retirement, all of a sudden these sorts of issues - like human contact and retailers you trust - are important."

Sometimes customer service veers into pressure - albeit of a helpful kind. Personal trainers working for the BodyScapes Fitness chain have begun calling clients who haven't come in for a workout in a while - a long while. The trainers offer members a free session, worth \$90, to get them back in the groove.

"They're very appreciative," says owner Robert Shapiro.

Well, as appreciative as a person can be after getting a nagging call from the gym. ■

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