

Can't Somebody Else Do It?

Have you ever pondered the conundrum that while everyone complains of being time-starved, they more than willingly accept more and more tasks that were previously done for them by large companies.

Our time starvation is not because we work any harder – our great-grandparents could attest to working 10 hours a day, 6 days a week and being too exhausted to do anything else; or because of child-rearing – the birth-rate has never been lower. Since the invention of electricity we sleep 2 hours less, giving us more time. No, it's because we do a mountain of tasks that used to be done for us by somebody else. We check ourselves in at the airport, we do all our own banking, we put gas in our cars (did gas get any cheaper when they got rid of the people who used to do it?) and we even check out our own shopping. Our parents never did any of that.

This phenomenon really struck me on a recent trip to IKEA. We embarked on a 6km walk around every square inch of the store to select our own furniture. We then traipsed even further into the bowels of their warehouse to collect the goods ourselves, manhandled the heavy boxes into our car and then, of course, went home and did all the construction. The few things they still did for us hardly seem more efficient for their ability to focus on them. The checkout process is always interminably slow (similar to Costco where we also do most of the work ourselves) and even worse, the very thing we went for was out of stock.

In other retail establishments, the message that one receives about an out-of-stock item is usually pretty clear about who is to blame. The very phrase “out-of-stock” I think sounds like they are admitting they screwed up, by either not ordering enough or in

having sent too many to the wrong store. However, at IKEA, they had even passed on that element of the supply chain to us with a sign that announced “Temporarily oversold.”

Maybe I was just a little testy having walked so far for so little, but that phrase really bugged me. “Oh, I see – WE’RE to blame for buying too many.” But then the subtle cleverness of the phrase sank in when the alternate interpretation of “Every Tom, Dick and Harry has been loading up on this one, so if you want to avoid being lumped in with the herd, you’d better buy an alternative (that by inference is currently under-sold) to maintain your pathetically deluded self-image of individuality.” Which we duly did by buying a different cabinet because it was remarkably cheap, and where else can you buy something called a DETOLF?

The inference to me however is clear. You can pass on absolutely anything to the customer and they will sheepishly go along with it, believing that by apparently giving them more flexibility it is somehow helping with their time-starvation, as opposed to the reality where it is adding to it. So, no matter what your product or service, your New Year’s resolution should be to adopt Homer Simpson’s electioneering slogan from when he ran for the post of garbage collection czar: “Can’t somebody else do it?”

Why have all those people crammed together in a workspace no bigger than my desk handing out coffee and donuts in the Tim Horton’s drive-through? IKEA seem to think that I am capable of being a shop assistant, a warehouse hand and a joiner simultaneously, so I’m sure I could pour a coffee and pick a Boston Crème off the shelf. Why not get me to wash my own hair at the salon? At least I won’t get my collar soaking wet and would avoid the disturbing sensation of having a stranger dry my ears.

In this age of polarities, either get your customers to do absolutely everything for you and reduce your prices accordingly; or conversely, do absolutely everything for your customers and charge them what you like. After all, the hair salon is the only way of having a 19 year-old hot chick run her fingers through my hair and it still be OK with my wife, so who cares what it costs?