

The Human

BY DORI MOLITOR

CEO, WOMANWISE

I have never loved a car as much as I love my Jaguar S-Type, but I have also never been as outraged as I was when I took my new car in to be serviced.

Let's start with Jaguar's service counter, which has a circular design and discourages people from forming lines. Instead, customers are expected to pick a place to linger at random, and hope to win the attention of one of the *men* behind the counter.

This proves to be a real problem for the *women* in the room. Time after time, the men behind the counter gave priority to the men milling around it. I stood there and watched no fewer than eight men being served—all of whom came in after me.

I felt invisible, diminished and frustrated. Finally, I planted myself directly in front of one of the service stations and just waited to make my move. When I finally found myself face-to-face with a man behind the counter, he spent another five minutes clacking away at his computer keyboard before even looking up at me.

Adding insult to injury, he told me that the rental car I had been promised was not available—because he had just given the last one to one of the guys who was helped before me.

I would be willing to overlook this one incident, except that my experience was essentially the same the second and third times I took the car in to be serviced. While I hate to think I was treated the way I was just because I'm a woman, I decided to test that theory by sending my husband to take care of the fourth checkup.

Well, guess what? He was treated like royalty. He now likes to joke that he might even go golfing with one of his new friends from the Jaguar dealership. A laugh riot, my husband is.

Seriously, my experience at Jaguar has been bad enough to make me consider choosing another kind of car next time, even though I love my S-Type. It is a cautionary tale not only for Jaguar, but also to any retailer that fails to treat each and every customer with respect.

STOP THE INSANITY

The insanity is that retailers treat women—and men—with contempt every day. And yet they expect us to be loyal for life. You know, it's not even enough just to treat us like human beings (which would be nice). The greatest retailers are those who treat their customers like friends.

The guys who work at my Jaguar dealership—and every other brand that has been known to disrespect its customers—ought to ask themselves these questions:

Would you count a person who places their self-interest over your personal interest as a true friend? Would a friend be someone who insists on telling you what you can and cannot do? Could you fall in love with someone who hasn't taken an interest to really get to know you?

Fortunately, there are many good examples of retailers who shape their customer relationships based on the principles of friendship: Patagonia, Sephora, Staples, Anthropologie, Best Buy's Geek Squad and, of course, Starbucks among them.

They share my values. I connect with friends and retailers who enable me to live out my life with vitality and with purpose. Patagonia, the luxury outerwear retailer, has a sense of values that permeates the shopping experience because it is so deeply rooted in the company's heritage and its mission. The company was founded in the 1950's by a mountain-climber named Yvon Chouinard, who started out making climbing gear for himself because he didn't like what was available commercially at the time.

Mr. Chouinard makes it clear in his recent autobiography that his level of commitment to his customers is personal: "If a tool failed, it could kill someone and since we were our own best customers, there was a good chance it could be us!" He extends the same kind of values to his company's workplace, where the

The greatest *retailers* not only serve
their *customers* with courtesy.
They treat them like *friends*.

Touch

Patagonia culture blurs “the lines between work, play and family.”

Patagonia’s values are perhaps best expressed in its mission statement: “Make the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, and use the business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis.” That spirit does indeed permeate not only the look and feel of Patagonia’s stores, but also the way its staff treats its shoppers.

They recognize our interdependence. We should both look out for each others’ interests—the way friends do. Sephora, the cosmetics retailer, has forever changed the way makeup is sold at retail by allowing its customers greater control over the shopping experience.

In a departure from traditional cosmetics merchandising, Sephora encourages its customers to try on most all of its products, and sales personnel—or *cast members* as Sephora calls them—get involved only when customers want them to.

As Sephora’s vice president of marketing, Betsy Olum, told *BusinessWeek* magazine: “We think clients like to have someone help them, so we’re an assisted self-service store,” but adds that Sephora also gives its customers more freedom from sales pressure: “Our customers can shop on their own and they don’t have to fight off spritzers,” she says.

They teach me. Just because I want control of my own shopping experience doesn’t mean I don’t need your help and advice. This is a tale of two retailers—Home Depot and Lowe’s. Home Depot recently broke a new TV campaign showing women talking about DIY projects and all the guidance/learning they get from Home Depot.

That’s the right strategy and the right message, but

the Home Depot in-store experience is still designed for the contractor/wholesaler segment—cement floors, fluorescent lights and forklifts. Lowe’s, by comparison, stresses a softer and kinder image. Merchandising is more around creating the actual environment of a project and displaying specific related items together. Not surprisingly, Home Depot fell to last place in the University of Michigan’s annual American Customer Satisfaction index, 11 points behind Lowe’s.

They make life simpler. I am extremely aware when something is made unnecessarily complex, and I’m willing to pay for simplicity in both money and loyalty. Staples has turned its “That Was Easy” slogan into a bona-fide pop-culture catchphrase, but only because it lives up to the retailer’s tagline when shoppers are in its stores.

The revelation, for Staples, was that their customers wanted just one thing—and that was to find what they were looking for as quickly and easily as possible. That’s actually not as easy as it sounds. Delivering a

streamlined shopping experience meant eliminating nearly 1,000 items from the store’s shelves.

It also involved re-training sales associates to take simple steps, like walking shoppers to the correct aisle as opposed to simply telling them where to look. But it has paid off for Staples, which reported an 18 percent increase in profits, to \$834 million, in 2005, according to *Business 2.0* magazine.

They feed my lust for discovery. There is so much sameness in the world. Take me on a journey that excites my sense of adventure. Anthropologie is a 40-store chain of women’s-clothing and home-furnishings that’s all about losing oneself in an eclectic array of exotic, worldwide curiosity.

The insanity is that retailers treat customers with contempt every day. And yet they expect us to be loyal for life.

The Anthropologie elan is described in vivid detail on the company's website: "Never satisfied with the familiar, our buyers and designers are on a tireless quest for those simple objects that bring beauty to our daily rituals, deepen our experiences, and to put it simply — make life inspiring."

As Anthropologie's president, Glen Senk, explains: "One of our core philosophies is that we spend the money that other companies spend on marketing to create a store experience that exceeds people's expectations. We don't spend money on messages — we invest in execution." He also reports that the company is growing fast and registering record sales.

They are fun. Loosen up! Be irreverent! Get real! Be a friend I'd like to spend time with. In other words, be like Best Buy's Geek Squad — that posse of tragically chic agents who dress like extras from *Revenge of the Nerds* and bring humor to the otherwise dismal world of consumer electronics repair.

This "help wanted" ad for Geek Squad says it all: "Recruits wanted to eliminate all evil computer behavior. Faint of heart need not apply... If you've got drive, strong customer relations skills, excellent button-pressing savvy and a mildly odd affinity for government-chic attire, you may be Geek Squad material."

Robert Stephens, founder of Geek Squad, says his business model is simply "just be nice and fix it." As a niche, that idea is huge, given that 29 percent of all callers reportedly swear at their customer service representative and 21 percent scream at them. It's probably safe to assume that a majority of Geek Squad customers escape their frustrations with smiles and maybe even a few laughs.

They make me feel comfortable. The antidote to my stressful life is a place that feels like home. Starbucks is the most obvious example of putting the "house" back into the "coffeehouse." But in an effort to keep a warm-and-cozy image as it expands across the globe, Starbucks is raising its own, high-set bar.

To make sure they get it right in each neighborhood, Starbucks actually has deployed designers into regional offices. The retailer is also taking special care to preserve key elements as well as the more

subtle touches of the vintage buildings it occupies, such as the fireplace mantle in a limestone building in Chicago's Beverly neighborhood.

As Janet Adamy reported in *The Wall Street Journal*, customers notice and appreciate the difference. "Mostly they're just large rooms with a counter," says Jim Venkus, a patron, referring to other Starbucks shops. "I think the designer or architect put a lot of thought into this."

They surprise me. Little surprises in a day can completely turn my day or week around. It tells me that I matter — and friends like to know they matter to each

other. Here's an example of surprise and delight. There's a fashion apparel chain called Acorn that recently opened in my neighborhood.

I was trying on numerous work-style outfits and was continually standing on my tippy-toes to imagine how the outfits would look with high heels. The store manager, Sandy, whom I had never met before, kept offering me her sandals. Sandy said she had recently bought the sandals at Macy's, loved them, and asked if I would like her to call to see if they had a pair in my size and have them put them on hold for me.

I almost fell over; I hadn't even thought of it, but I loved the shoes and was overwhelmed by the personal favor. Sandy called Macy's, waited on the phone for the size check, gave them my name... and the next day I owned the same pair of sandals.

If you treat your customers like friends, and create a retail experience that fulfills our human emotional needs, the result is brand enthusiasts who spread the word about their brand experience and help grow your business.

Or you can be like Jaguar... and risk ending up friendless (except for my husband), on the scrap-heap of retailing history. ■

If you treat your customers like friends, the result is brand enthusiasts who help grow your business.



DORI MOLITOR is founder and ceo of **WomanWise LLC** (womanwise.com) a WatersMolitor Company, a hybrid consultancy-agency specializing in marketing brands to women. Dori can be reached at dmolitor@womanwise.com or (952) 797-5000.