

Move 'em in, check 'em out

By Terri Willson

You're willing to overlook that you have caught your work smock in the cash register drawer about three times in the last few minutes. You're running out of sacks, the customer lines stretch back to the men's wear and somewhere close a child is nagging his mother for a Zippo comic or a tuiti-fruiti gum.

Listen, you're a discount store cashier. You can endure all that. Taken lightly, it's even rather humorous.

I've worked at two Lincoln discount stores: Treasure City, 27th St. and Highway 2, for 2½ years part-time, and Woolworth's at 11th and O streets, for about four months.

Treasure City's eight-register, modern department store houses several different companies under its massive shelter, from ladies' wear to automotive. At the 45-year-old Woolworth's downtown all merchandise is owned by the F.W. Woolworth Co., where school supplies, cosmetics and records are carefully marked to be checked out at one of three small, antique cash registers.

Customer knows best

Perhaps to the customer—the "always-right" customer—who breezes past you and exchanges money, even greetings, perhaps to him, it's humorous. But not to you.

You try to be a good sport, when dimes keep slipping out of the register and irretrievably are lost in the garbage box beneath it. But when you staple your finger with the receipt to the sack, that's when the whole day starts to become an annoying, painful process.

If the lines are long, and you have already called your full force to their button-pushing posts there's not much to do but duck under the counter briefly to scream a muffled curse.

"What's that you're doing down there, Miss?" a cross, shopworn customer demands.

Your face is flushed from bending down, but it starts to throb with indignation at her insensitivity.

"Just looking for a dime I dropped, Ma'am," you say demurely.

"Well, I don't have all day..."

Take it easy, you think. It's people like that, in their over-sized coats covering equally large frames with their grating voices, that could cause you to miscount your change, or make an overring—pitfalls which befall a careless cashier.

"Have a nice day"

"Fifty, seventy-five, and one dollar" you spew the words out deliberately, carefully counting her change with a hint of irritation but enough control to show the customer hasn't gotten the better of you.

"Have a nice day," you say and try to

sound like you mean it. (After all, you can't hold a grudge forever.) One of two things then happens. The customer ignores your attempt at a truce, snatches her package of candy bars and hair color, and flounces out the door. Or she looks up from her coin purse which she has been concentrating on to ignore you, and smiles and says, "You too." You feel better inside. And when you smile back, you really mean it.

That does it. You've blown your keep-it-cool, move-'em-along cover and she knows you're a soft touch.

First, she asks you if the store carries glittering gumbos, soon she's telling you about her grandchildren, her great great-grandchildren, and her plans for a fancy funeral, all in 42 seconds.

"Puff the magic dragon" happens to be in line behind her.

"Hey, ya, listen, got any matches?" he asks. You look at the pathetic, grimy 14-year-old who is demanding if you have matches for him to light some noxious weed.

"No, I'm sorry." However, of course, I'm not really sorry. Maybe I've spared him lung cancer.

Missing merchandise

He uses plenty of expletive deletives as he sweeps past, smelling of dirt and the open air, to make you look apologetically at the little old lady waiting patiently in line behind the teenage clown.

She chirps up at you before you have time to ring up her sale, "How much is it, dear?" Patience is a virtue. How much is what? I don't see anything on the counter. And if there's nothing on the counter to pick up and mull over to hunt for a tiny tag with faded numbers on it (the price), then the job has come to a standstill.

A cashier is a creature of habit, repeating the same slide-the-merchandise-into-a-bag, tuck-the-money-into-the-drawer, send-the-customer-on-his-way routine 1,000 times a day.

Look—you don't care how sweet she is, or that her Big Bird hat matches her canary yellow coat. The woman simply has nothing to buy.

In a moment she's chucking.

"Oh, here it is." And she produces a wad of embroidery thread from her slight, gloved hand.

You're gentle. She reminds you of your grandmother. And anyway, it won't be long until you are old and lovable and a little forgetful yourself. (And if you work here much longer, you'll be her age in no time.)

Lunch time

The only thing to interrupt your controlled, concentrated movements is a sound



Photo by Scott Svoboda

Displays for "compulsive buyers" such as this candy rack can be found anywhere.

from very close by. Your stomach always knows when it's break time, even if your fingers work overtime.

Break is a hot dog or sandwich or maybe something edible in a brown bag brought from home.

Only a few more hours of this. Can you take it? It's your feet that aren't too anxious to answer. But you're 80 per cent in gear, so it's back to the cubbyhole, your station in life, amidst teddy bears, coloring books, ladies pantyhose and shoe polish.

"Check okay" please...change please... customer assistance please...

Is that your own voice over the public address system? You hadn't realized you could sound so authoritative.

When things get really dull, you condescend to sweep under the counter, which looks as though it hasn't been swept under since the store's grand opening 40

years ago.

Just as you've got an old grubby rag in your hand or a panfull of dust, a well-dressed middle-aged woman comes through your line. You're a fool—standing there with a portion of the store's dirt in your hand. Your hair is mussed and there's a smudge on your face. She takes advantage.

You won't soon forget that superior I-caught-an-otherwise-human-looking-young-woman-at-her-worst-possible-moment look, or the how-undignified-can-you-get look.

Listen, lady, your thoughts yell back at hers; how dignified can one be in a discount department store, where everything is sold at prices for the not-so-big spender loose in a jungle of tempting but useless items?

"Where are your cigarette lighters?" she asks.

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