

Buyer beware at the store and elsewhere

SHOP TALK



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I don't know what it is about this particular Christmas season, but I don't feel like doing much shopping.

I just don't want to part with my money this year.

In contemplating why, I decided it would be easy to say the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and the state of the economy are to blame. But, for me, I don't think that's the whole picture.

Now, there's no denying that Christmas, like most events and institutions in our culture, has become an absurdly commercial affair. America's capitalism, our lives are dictated by the bottom line, which brings me to my current list of consumer complaints.

For one, I recently bought a computer from a local retailer. The salesperson told me the computer was new when I bought it and the fact it was labeled "class-out special" meant the company needed to get it off their shelves to make room for new shipments. Months later and through a series of events, I learned from the manufacturer that my computer was, in fact, used. To make a long story a short one, I'll be in small claims court next year.

A few days ago, I went to look at cellular phone plans. And, as many of you may have noticed, not only do the service plan brochures provide limited information but also the salespeople aren't particularly forthcoming beyond the spiel they've been trained to give you. On and on, we went, this salesperson and I. I asked question after question. The salesperson countered with canned answer after canned answer.

Later, I asked the salesperson for the brochure of terms and conditions mentioned (in fine print) at the bottom of the service plan contract. In fact, by signing the contract, you're agreeing you've received and read that brochure. Well, the salesperson didn't have one. "You're the first customer who's asked for one," he said.

Even if you want to read the fine print, you can't.

What occurs to me next is my experience last weekend working with a moving company. When the movers showed up to do the work I had hired them for, I was informed the hourly rate applied to travel time, not just moving time. This was a distinction I made a point of clarifying three times with the person

who set up my moving appointment. Of course I shrugged it off and paid the extra money I didn't anticipate spending. After all, I had an apartment full of stuff to move.

My next complaint comes from the experiences of a colleague, Sharon Dargay. Several weeks ago, she and I were rear-ended by a drunk driver. We're both doing reasonably well, but Sharon's car was totaled. Well, Sharon is still working with her car insurer on a settlement claim. Through her efforts, which include calling owners of similar vehicles in Michigan who recently sold and contacting dealers for estimates on her car, she has almost doubled her claim amount. But I have to wonder if having to do all that work is mean why do we buy car insurance? So when we have a bad accident - a traumatic event to which I can testify - you won't be emotionally and financially burdened with having to purchase a new car.

These situations involve the consumer handing over money for products or services. I can distill what I consider to be the problem in one word: spin. If we aren't being outright lied to, as in the case of the computer I purchased, we're hearing less than the truth or being misled to believe something false.

Now I don't have a problem with good salesmanship or the art of persuasion, but it seems to me that we, as a culture, have become so wrapped up in our obsession with making money, that we're willing to lie to reach our goals.

Of course I'm probably not telling you anything you don't already know. It's a dangerous market out there for consumers. Buyer beware.

What's astounding is how pervasive and justified the use of spin and "selling" has become in reaching bottom-line goals.

True, it's only fair that people who make their living by selling things take their best shot at doing so. It's another thing when everything gets sold - not just hard goods and traditional consumer services - and a disregard for the truth is acceptable standard practice.

Maybe I'm overreacting and, in the process, generalizing. But if the American Red Cross is willing to spin the charitable American public after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, who else is?

I'm convinced nothing is sacred when it comes to spin and the bottom line. So, yes, buyer beware, but beware of information, too.

High kicks for Christmas



STAFF PHOTO BY GARY MALKERA

Spree: LaToya Croft of Pontiac (left) meets Rockettes Allison Roller-Woerner of Lake Orion (center) and Annie Gibbons-Syke of Highland at Summit Place Mall in Waterford. Croft won the Shop with the Rockettes holiday spending spree contest at the mall.

Kmart among 3 retailers honored at annual Michigan Retailer of the Year awards

Kmart Corp., which has its headquarters in Troy, was among three Michigan retail companies recently honored for community service at the fourth annual Michigan Retailer of the Year Awards.

The Michigan Retailers Association awards recognize retail businesses for contributions to civic, charitable and volunteer activities. Co-sponsors of the awards are the Michigan Press Association's Michigan Newspapers, Inc. and the Michigan Talk Radio Network.

The awards are given in three categories - small, medium and large - based on annual sales volume. Kmart won in the large retailer category.

In addition to providing supplies for the relief effort following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Kmart has been the first-place team in the March of Dimes WalkAmerica program for 17 consecutive years, raising more than \$36 million to fight birth defects through its efforts.

Also, Michigan Kmart volunteers raised more than \$289,000 in 2001 through local walks and store events to support programs like Healthy Baby Services in Wayne and Oakland counties.

Other noted community service includes encouraging enrollment in state Child Health Insurance Programs and support of a traveling Smithsonian exhibit on African-American music.

Swift Printing Co. in Grand Rapids was in the small retailer category, and Edmund T. Ahee Jewelry Co. in Grosse Pointe Woods was honored in the medium category.

The Michigan Retailers Association is a state trade association of general merchandise retailers with more than 5,500 retail business members operating more than 12,000 stores across the state.

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