



Consumer Man

Possible bag conspiracy threatens to undermine social order.

By Paul Mecurio

I'm one of those people who yell at store clerks. Not just any store clerks, but the ones who are rude, incompetent or indifferent. In other words, all store clerks. I'm the guy who always has to speak to the manager. In my head, I'm "Consumer Man": a superhero fighting on behalf of oppressed consumers the world over. In my wife's head, I'm crazy.

"Someday you're going to scream at the wrong person," she says. "And you're going to get shot." This "wrong person" has figured into so many of our conversations that I feel as if I know him, even though I really know only two things: 1) he's "wrong" and 2) he's going to shoot me.

One day I called a computer company and tried to reach a human in customer service. As I ran a gantlet of voice prompts, I couldn't get the automated female voice to understand me when I said "yes." Repeatedly, she asked if I'd like customer service. Each time, I said "yes." She kept asking. I could feel consumers everywhere being oppressed. So, standing there in my superhero costume (boxers and T-shirt), it was Consumer Man to the rescue. Instead of saying "yes," I tried other one-word responses.

"Would you like customer service?"

"Idiot!"

"Would you like customer service?"

"Moron!"

"Would you like customer service?"

"Whore!"

As this insane tirade took place, my wife and 8-year-old son looked on in shock. I vowed to change my ways — or at least to tell my wife that I was changing them. A new, more tolerant me was born. Someone else would have to fight for the rights of consumers. I had a family to not "frighten to death" anymore.

With this new approach, one day I found myself with eight items in the express lane at the supermarket. I felt great. Then the guy at the register asked, "Would you like a bag for these?"

He was kidding, right? No — he asked again. Who carries eight loose items? He asked *again*: Would I like a bag? I wanted to say: "No, I'm from Africa. I'll just balance these on my head as I walk barefoot 126 miles to my village." But the "new

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Paul" politely said, "Yes, I'd like a bag," and I was on my way.

Being passive wasn't so bad. Although I did feel a pain in my chest and a tingling in my left arm. But if repressing my true feelings caused a heart attack, so be it. It was better than being shot. My wife would have been proud.

On the way home I stopped at a little newsstand to buy a paper. It's owned by a nice Indian gentleman I had given my business to for years. With him I never needed to "speak to the manager." Besides, in his stand there wasn't room for one.

It was raining, so I asked for a plastic bag for my paper. He lashed out at me: "We have no bag, just go, we don't have a bag, go, go, no bag!!" I was shocked, first at his hostile refusal, then at his use of "we." Denied a bag again! Had the supermarket guy called the newsstand guy to tell him I was coming?

In my new, positive tone I asked again if I could please have a bag. He said: "No! I only make 5 cents on the paper."

Since when was rain protection given for only periodicals with a healthy profit margin? In other words, I needed a bag. I saw a big pile of bags behind him. I was crestfallen. After all the business I had given him, I earned the right to encase my news in plastic. "New Paul" was gone. "Consumer Man" was back.

"I want to speak to the manager," I bellowed.

"What? No manager, no bag, just go!!"

I said he was rude, incompetent and indifferent. Although not in those words. He responded, "I'm going to kick your butt, properly!" He said "properly." I had never been told off so politely. "Go or I'll kick your butt!" he repeated.

"Do it!" I screamed and dropped my drawers right there on the sidewalk in Midtown Manhattan. While slapping myself on the backside I yelled: "You want it? Here it is! I demand a bag!"

Soon we were being watched by a large crowd — if they only knew I was doing this for them! — and two police officers.

"What's going on?" asked one cop. With my pants around my ankles and a tone of complete justification, I explained, "He won't give me a bag!"

Unbelievably, the officers made him give me one ("I hate it when my paper gets wet," explained the cop), but they gave us both summonses. "Looks like you picked the wrong person to tangle with," they said to the newsstand guy. "You're lucky he didn't shoot you." I couldn't wait to tell my wife. I had finally met the wrong person — and he was I. ■

ILLUSTRATION BY BOB HAMBLY

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