

The basic rules of good

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 2004

customer service

C10 THE NEWS HERALD

I recently purchased a new car — a 2004 Hyundai Santa Fe — and this was particularly exciting for me since at the ripe old age of 57, I have never owned a brand, spanking new car.

My first clunker was a Chevy Impala that I purchased from a friend of a friend, and the best thing I can say about it was that it prepared me for the unexpected in years to come.

For instance, I remember the time I was sailing along on the Long Island Expressway at 70 miles per hour when the gas pedal stuck.

I soon realized that even with my foot off the accelerator, I was picking up speed and traveling at close to 80 mph.

Hitting the brake failed to slow the car down, and just when I figured I was doomed, but angry that the Impala had gotten the best of me, I slammed my foot down on the accelerator and said something I can't repeat in mixed company.

The pressure of my foot must have jarred something loose because the car finally began to slow down.

This same scenario happened two more times, but only to me, not my ex-husband, who thought I was naturally

imagining things (as if in my wildest imagination I would put myself in this predicament). Eventually, after numerous visits to a host of mechanics, a new spring was installed.

I drove that Impala until one day, in the middle of a busy intersection, it stalled and then refused to go into any other gear but reverse. Luckily, my father was with me, got behind the wheel, and drove the car home — in reverse — a pretty darn good feat since to this day I have trouble going backwards.

My dad had always preached on the value of buying an American made car, so not wanting to disappoint him, I followed the Impala with a Chevy Nova, two Oldsmobiles, and finally a Malibu. Somewhere along my path of cars, however, Dad went over to the other side when he pulled up in front of my house in a brand new white Honda.

But this column isn't about American cars versus foreign

cars — it's about good customer service. When my husband and I walked into Paramount Ford-Hyundai in Valdese to consider the Santa Fe, we were met by a young man named Jamie Woods.

Car salesmen tend to get a bad rap and have to endure a lot of apprehension from customers walking in the door, and I suppose we were no exception when the first words out of my husband's mouth was, "Listen, we're only looking and definitely not buying a car today."

And as instructed, I sat with my mouth clamped tightly shut since it's common knowledge around our house that I tend to get too friendly too fast, and it's also difficult for me to conceal my emotion when I see something I like.

But Jamie just smiled at my husband, offered each of us a cup of coffee, and proceeded to tell us all about the Santa Fe.

Later, he took us for a spin so we could see firsthand the superior quality of the product and, of course, I fell in love with it.

A squeal may have even left my lips at that point of our car-buying quest. Jamie was patient as we asked a boatload of questions

and he was eager to help find us a four-wheel drive model in Charlotte since he had sold the last one in Valdese a couple of weeks ago.

During the back-and-forth negotiations between dealerships regarding price, we learned a lot about Jamie and he learned a lot about us and never once did we feel pressured to buy.

My husband may have been right — we didn't buy a car that day — but we bought one the next day simply because there weren't any four-wheel drives on the lot.

My positive experience buying my new car got me thinking about customer service and why some companies shine while others leave you cold.

I found an article on www.allbusiness.com recently on "Ten Rules for Great Customer Service," and I think a lot of how Jamie treated us can be attributed to his practicing these pretty basic rules:

1) Commit yourself to quality service and create a positive experience for the customer;

2) Know your product;

3) Know your customers — talk to people and get to know their needs and buying habits;

4) Treat people with courtesy and respect;

5) Never argue with a customer;

6) Don't leave customers hanging;

7) Always provide what you promise;

8) Assume that customers are telling the truth;

9) Focus on making customers, not making sales; and

10) Make it easy to buy — help people find what they need, explain how the product works and do whatever you can to facilitate the transaction.

As a wife and mother, I tend to get down to basics and measure customer service by the way I'm treated in a grocery store.

For example, while I was living on Long Island, N.Y., and would have to do my weekly grocery shopping for a family of five, not only would I have to unload the overflowing shopping cart, but then I'd have to jump over to the receiving end and pack the groceries as they came speeding down the conveyor belt.

As I struggled to get the cold stuff separated from the non-perishables in record time, the oblivious cashier was usually commiserating with another cashier on how many hours she had worked that

day or searching for a cute stock boy to flirt with.

I only seemed to get her attention when I held out a fistful of 20s or threatened to take a step forward with my unpaid loot.

However, imagine my delight when I moved down to North Carolina and watched as not one but two young men carefully packed my groceries and then offered to wheel the cart out to my car! Could it get any better than that? Well, yes, it can.

Tedious grocery shopping has become even more enjoyable since I moved to Morgan- ton because I shop at the same Enola Road Food Lion store and now the store employees know me by sight and wave, nod or make pleasant conversation as I slowly walk the aisles.

And if I can't find an item and ask one of the employees where it is, instead of yawning and pointing to an aisle, he or she leads the way or volunteers to retrieve the item for me.

It may not seem like a lot to you, but I think it says quite a bit about good customer service. After all, I keep coming back.

PEG DEMARCO is a local columnist for The News Herald.