

# Things never to tell your customers

Recently, I stopped at a local hardware store for a new bolt for a wheelbarrow. The only metal pin they had was too long and a clerk gladly volunteered to cut it down to size: As he was sawing away, one of the owners waddled past, scowled and snapped: "Doesn't he have a hacksaw at home?"

Granted, we've all been treated to these sorts of remarks, comments and faux pas at businesses of all types and sizes, but that doesn't mean we should. Here, based on my own stumbles down the rocky road of verbal miscues, is just a sampling of things that a client or customer should never, ever hear at your business:

1. **"Why are you doing that for him?"** This is pretty much what the hardware store owner's flip remark meant. It may seem ludicrous to say it, but service for a customer - be it run of the mill or beyond the call of duty - should never be questioned- in front of the person with the Visa card in hand. Not merely rude, but also indicative of a businessperson who either doesn't know what customer service is or doesn't give a hex nut whether her employees provide it or not.

2. **"Are you sure you can afford this?"** On a visit to a nearby greenhouse, a manager cajoled an employee to "make sure he knows how expensive that is" before she unraveled a roll of garden liner for me to inspect. That sort of remark effectively questions a customer's capacity to pay for a particular item, not to mention showcasing a laziness to display wares that may end up back on the shelf. That's not to say you shouldn't do customers the courtesy of letting them know something is expensive, but don't do it with the connotation that it's probably beyond their means.

3. **"What an idiot that last guy was!"** Said by one grocery clerk. Needless to say, not every client or customer is well-behaved in word and deed, but commenting on them to another employee - or, even worse, a customer - is gossipy and grossly unprofessional.

4. **"We don't have it."** However succinct, this is a repeat offender, said most recently when I asked a pharmacy clerk if they carried a particular brand of toothpaste (after her four-word reply, the clerk stared past me glassy-eyed as though she were looking for ships on the horizon). Of course, businesses run out of stock or may not offer a certain service or item, but just hearing "no" or words to that effect is tantamount to adding "And stay out!" Don't leave things hanging like that. Instead, make sure you offer customers alternatives to what they want. You may be able to sell them on an equally useful substitute. You can even sow some goodwill by referring them to other stores or competitors.

5. **"What a ...name."** (Choose "different," "funny," "unusual," "bizarre," etc.) Don't misunderstand me. I know I have a, shall we say, esoteric last name. But I don't adore the attention I get when an insipid nitwit callously editorializes about my family moniker. Not sensitive in the least. Not me. But not everyone is as thick-skinned, so make it a policy never to remark on a customer's name, as even well-intentioned curiosity may come across inappropriately. Instead, it's far more politic to ask how a person's name is pronounced correctly.

6. **"I haven't a clue about what I'm talking about, but I'll ramble on regardless."** This is the Brand X version of any number of ill-conceived remarks, ranging from the bank clerk who loudly gives a customer her mutual fund recommendations ("I hear you can make money in them!") to the doctor's office receptionist who tells a patient that she may need a biopsy. Don't strangle your employees' eagerness to help clients and customers, but urge them to stick to topics and advice with which they're familiar. And, if they don't know something, make certain they refer customers to an employee who does.

7. **"I only work here."** This cliché - most recently uttered to me by a waitress after the wrong meal was delivered for the third time - should be forever banned. In four wretched words, an employee conveys a complete absence of enthusiasm or involvement, let alone a willingness to address a problem. Instead, make certain your people know that there's likely someone else available who can tackle something that is beyond their means.