

On Guests and Customers

by Stephen G. Barone

Nowadays, whenever I go shopping I seem to be a “guest” at every store where I used to be a “customer.” But what occurs between a proprietor and his patron is the opposite of what occurs between a host and his guest. In fact, treating a patron as a guest would actually be a degradation of the relationship that properly exists between patron and proprietor.

A guest is invited into our home where he receives *gratis* our food, potables, incidentals, and hospitality. He has no avenue of recourse if any of it does not meet his expectations. His right to complain is tempered by our right to throw him out on his ear.

A proprietor, on the other hand, is held to higher standards. When people enter his store, he and they anticipate mutual benefits—neither is doing a favor for the other. His failure to provide goods commensurate with the expectations of his clientele is not only injurious to the enterprise, but also potentially litigable. In consideration of such stark contrasts, any shopkeeper would do well not to confuse his customers with guests.

There is lately a similar blurring between the words “customer” and “taxpayer.” This shouldn’t be a surprise. Public-sector bureaucrats are notorious for hopping on a

bandwagon roughly about the time when private-sector managers are jumping off. Therefore, government agencies have taken to calling their forced constituencies “customers” just as the shopkeepers and bankers are abandoning the term and moving on to “guests.”

Consider the IRS, whose personnel lately refer to us as “customers” rather than “taxpayers.” It’s annoying enough to be called a “guest” when my ostensible “host” is patently expecting money for his “hospitality.” But it’s downright maddening to be called a “customer” when I’m having money extracted from me ultimately at the point of a gun.

The essence of the relationship between customers and proprietors is the *voluntary* exchange of money for goods. But there is nothing voluntary about the taxes that are levied on us to redistribute the wealth. A true customer can refuse to do business with an entity. But refuse to pay taxes and your property is seized. Resist such appropriation of your resources and the police will demonstrate forthwith the state’s “customer service policy” for its recalcitrant patrons.

Customers are not guests and taxpayers are not customers. Obfuscating such palpable differences does not engender warm and fuzzy feelings. Quite the contrary, it breeds cynicism and abets distrust, thereby hindering good will, which is precisely the opposite of what both ruses are supposed to achieve. □

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