

Move Over, Miss Manners. . . Please

by Erik_Deckers

Maybe I'm old-fashioned, but I think society has lost its sense of etiquette and politeness. We've forgotten simple manners and the niceties of a civilized society. No longer do we display the manners we were taught as children. We've become petulant and rude. We're quick to whine about the slightest offense. And we voice our displeasure at the top of our lungs like a spoiled child who didn't get the toy he wanted. A simple smile and hello from a stranger is often ignored, thank yous are forgotten, and the greetings by a salesperson in a retail store are met with suspicion, or more often, a sneer and a glare that says "who are you to disturb me?" Those should be met with a look that says, "the person you're trusting not to wipe a booger in the outfit you're about to try on, that's who." I've heard from people who work in service industries, as well as seen firsthand, that many customers are as snotty as a kindergarten class during cold and flu season. One friend, who was also a nursery school teacher, used to work at a printing company. She constantly dealt with irate customers, but finally got fed up. After being yelled at by one caller, she said, "Ma'am, I teach nursery school. My kids would never speak that way, and there's no way I'm going to let you do it either," and hung up. She quit her job soon after. It's standard practice in many retail outlets to greet customers with a friendly "hello, how are you?" The acceptable response is "fine, and you?" But the typical response is a snide "I'm just looking!" Many shoppers seem to have a phobia that the sales clerks might actually talk with them. So they shun all forms of contact with the staff, and then get upset because no one will help them. I see this in restaurants as well. Customers will barely acknowledge their server, refuse to make eye contact, won't engage them in conversation, and then complain that their server wasn't very friendly. If you have ever done this before -- and I have yet to meet someone who has not, me included -- there are two things you should do: Step 1: Get over yourself. You're not any better than the person who's there to help you. Step 2: See Step 1. Repeat as necessary. I learned this the hard way. Several years ago, I made the horrible mistake of taking my frustrations out on a airline ticket agent. I was flying home from The Netherlands, with a stopover in London, and connecting flight home. I had to pay an extra surcharge for my luggage that I didn't pay on the flight out, and I wasn't happy about it. So I let the ticket agent know my true feelings on the matter, but she was resolute. I grudgingly paid the fee, and boarded my flight without giving it any further thought. Once I landed in London, I went to the ticket counter to see if I could get an upgrade, or at least an aisle seat. "I'm sorry, sir, I don't show you as a passenger on this flight," the agent said. "There must be some mistake," I said and showed him the ticket. "That may be, but you're not on this flight. It shows that you were, but you were recently canceled." "Really? When?" "About 90 minutes ago." That's when I realized why the Dutch agent had been so calm -- almost giddy -- as I left her counter. She had canceled my flight, nearly leaving me stranded in England. Luckily, there were still seats available, and I was able to get back on the flight and make it home on time. But I learned my lesson. Now, whenever I fly, every ticket agent is my buddy. I treat them with a hearty friendliness that only a person who was nearly stranded in a country with a 150% exchange rate can treat someone. So let this be a lesson to those of you who try to boost your own ego by making others feel small. If you're the kind of person who ignores your server, dismiss them with a curt, "that'll do," or if you snap your fingers to get their attention, just remember, they have many ways of getting back at you. I can't say what they are, except to say that the terms "salad fork," "sweaty fat guy," and "chest hair comb" are often mentioned. Laughing Stalk Syndicate, Copyright 2006

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