

## The Customer Is Always Right

These days in American business, salesmen want marks, er, customers to believe their businesses exist to make us happy. And as products become more ephemeral, like the Internet service that brings you these pages, the hype about serving customers gets even louder. I think that it's about time that we started demanding the service we deserve.

I don't mean that we should do this by flooding the customer service departments with complaints or boycotting bad products. I want to change the basic terms of contract so that I get what I want, and the sales folks get to back up their outlandish claims.

I want the L.A. Times to bill me by the fact. And I don't mean facts that any idiot can intuit, either. For example, I don't want to be billed for their alleged predictions of the alleged weather here. I know it will probably be clear and sunny. I shouldn't have to pay for that.

I want information I can't find out easily myself, or at least informed opinions on topics I care about. If I want to know what 10 random people at the mall think of U. S. foreign policy, I'll go to the mall and ask them myself. I want to open the editorial page and know what my Senator thought about it when the *Times* got her out of bed. I may break my by-the-fact clause for any Senatorial opinion acquired after 2 A. M.

And none of this Matt-Drudge, unsubstantiated-rumor crap. Give me the whole story, stained dress and all, when you can corroborate it. Let's face it, if that whole Lewinsky saga had been printed in only one week, it would have been a domestic policy head-rush for which I would gladly have paid top dollar. The year of half-truths and innuendo got thin in a hurry, and I think my payments for it should have, too.

The phone companies are another prime target for improved contracts. Phone company advertisements claim that their products will improve my business and home life. Stress will disappear; communication will be easy and fun. Apparently I'll even get to contact and be contacted by more attractive people. I'm a reasonable man, I won't even try to hold them to that, but what I will do is ask to be billed by the reduction in my blood pressure during and after installation.

My life will be better? Installation is easy? OK, let's back that up. I have the cuff right here, and I'll reduce my salt intake during the testing period. But there's no way that a company that believes that determining when their service person will arrive to within an "exact" half-day interval constitutes customer service is going to make a dime if they're billed by the pressure cuff.

Banks? Double my money back when they lose some. Doctors? Give me a dime back for every degree that stethoscope is below 85F. I'm willing to sit in the waiting room for extra time for free as long as it's for a good cause. I understand that medical emergencies get priority. But if I can get Adam Smith's invisible hand working for me, it'll be warming that cryogenic torture device.

As a general piece of boilerplate, I want \$50 every time I get to a place in a telephone menu and can't get back to where I started. And I want a thousand when the hell-spawned contraption hangs up on me.

It's been a pleasure doing business with you.