

The SCOW Chronicles: Stupid Customer Of the Week

Contributed by Shiftless
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A Shiftless Baristo Article

August 18, 2006Â

Starting a discussion seriesÂ of true-life storiesÂ about challenging customers, and how dealing with them can help us become better baristi.

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I love the profession, and so do you, or else why would you be reading BARISTO?

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Nevertheless, every barista has had her share of notably bad customers â€“ the ill-mannered, the mean-spirited, and the uncurably dense. For my part, Iâ€™m pleased to say that these have been few enough that they really are noteworthy. Iâ€™m also blessed with a generally imperturbable demeanor, so most minor annoyances donâ€™t weigh on me.

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I am proposing that the BARISTO Community start an ongoing discussion:

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THE SCOW CHRONICLES â€“ Stupid Customer Of the Week.

Now, I really want to maintain the upbeat and humorous tone for BARISTO, so to do this right we need to set some ground rules.

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SCOW will be balanced by a â€œBARISTO Classic Momentsâ€• Column, with true stories of the heart-warming variety. SCOW Chronicles are for a purpose: to pool the collective wisdom of the BARISTO community to find ways that the barista could have/might have best handled the unreasonably demanding customer.

SCOW columns are not intended solely to let baristi vent and fume. That can be a part of it, but not all of it.

SCOW columns need to be strictly true: no made up fables, no exaggerations. What really happened, how did you handle it, and what do you think in retrospect you should have done?

SCOW columns should protect the identities of the customers and should not reveal your employerâ€™s procedures, rules,

or any other proprietary information.Â

Although this column is appearing in the Articles section of BARISTO, we will be moving the discussions over into the Community section where they can be an ongoing discussion group. I know this one will be popular!

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In this context, "Stupid" is not limited to its literal definition, but will also include Demanding, Obstinate, Tiresome! you see the picture.

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I will start us off, naturally.

Â SCOW Profile: The cracker thiefÂ

Category: petty theft

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Setting: My espresso shop is a large kiosk, smack in the middle of a suburban shopping mall. We are in the center atrium of the mall, on the lower level but can view on all sides the second level around us. An escalator nearby provides access to and from the upper level.

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The SCOW: This was a little old man, always a little shabby looking, and always wearing a vest with many pockets over his shirt despite the time of year or the heat. All the baristi in my store came to know him on sight but we never knew his name.

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SCOW Alert! This "customer" would politely wait his turn in line, come to the register and ask the register partner "can I have a cup of water? I need to take a pill." When the register partner would turn to fill a cup with water, during the moment when the worker had his back turned, the old man would grab some of our chocolate graham crackers (displayed at the register) and stuff them into his vest pockets without a word and without paying. As far as we knew, he never took anything other than chocolate grahams. He also never bought anything in the store. I don't think any of us ever saw him actually take a pill, either. Then, on top of the boldness with which he stole the snack, he would ride the escalator to the second level and stand by the top of the escalator "in plain sight of our register workers" and eat the graham crackers then and there! He pulled this same stunt over and over, or tried to.

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What we actually did: The baristi adopted this approach. First, we all made sure that everyone in the store knew the Cracker Thief on sight. Second, we determined to take his "I need to take a pill" statement at face value. After all, other customers would see the interaction and that would form part of their experience in our store. Third, the worker at the register would never break eye contact with the Cracker Thief but instead call out to the barista working the bar, "So-and-So, can you get me a cup of cold water please?" By not looking away or getting the water himself, the register worker prevented the Cracker Thief from obtaining any opportunity to grab an item off the counter display. I believe that one of us notified mall security about the problem too, but I don't know if they were ever around at the right time to do something. After keeping up this routine for several months, the Cracker Thief disappeared.

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What we did not do: We did not confront the Thief directly about his theft, at least not to my knowledge "if anyone did, it was while I was not there. We never chased him up the escalator about the crackers" did not want to make a scene.

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My Thoughts: I think we handled it pretty well. By never making a scene, we preserved the coffeeshop atmosphere for every other customer. By always honoring the Cracker Thief's request for water, he knows that he always got the consideration that he asked for while in our store. Maybe if he straightens himself out in future he will remember that and start becoming a paying customer, or refer positively to our store.

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Your Turn: What should we have done? Should we have chased him down? Should we have prosecuted?

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Could we have helped him? Might this have been a homeless man asking for help in a backhanded way? Might he have been genuinely destitute and hungry?

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I'd like to hear your SCOW stories too. Post them here as a comment, or look in the Community pages to see if a discussion thread has started on this.

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Let's all keep working on getting better and better at handling the SCOWs as we all move closer to baristi perfection.

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- Shiftless