

Customers seek goodwill from retailers at Christmas

By Bruce A. Love

For many people, Christmas is important for a number of reasons. Naturally, the most important part of any religious holiday is the spiritual observance of the celebrated event. Holidays are also important for family gatherings, reminiscing with friends, and preserving cultural and family traditions. Christmas, as well as other religious holidays, gives us a unique opportunity to put our houses in order (both literally and spiritually), and open our hearts and homes to others. For businesses, particularly those associated with retail, Christmas also offers an opportunity to bring order and profitability to the business.

Growing up outside of Philadelphia, I had access to the large department stores that offer incredible concerts and displays at Christmastime. Wanamaker's (now Hecht's - Lord and Taylor's) has held free Christmas organ recitals for about 90 years. These concerts are actually as visually spectacular, as they are musically magnificent. Strawbridge's, not to be outdone, also stages Christmas experiences that celebrate traditional aspects of Christmas. Their life-sized Dickens characters and shops occupy an entire floor of the department store, and celebrate an era richly steeped in religious and family traditions. Successful businesses recognize the importance of maintaining a religious connection to the holiday. Admittedly, Jacob Marley's ghost is not a religious spirit, but the message of Dickens' "Christmas Carol" is undeniably consistent with the spirit of Christmas.

Historically, Christmas has been a time of selfless charitable generosity. Organizations such as the Salvation Army, Toys for Tots, and others, have provided shoppers, students, and businesses an opportunity to set aside self-interests, and extend a charitable hand toward others. Many stores and businesses have welcomed these worthy organizations and efforts. More recently, however, some businesses have chosen to secularize the season, and sanitize it of any religious reference.

I suppose the secularization strategy of Christmas retailing is intended to appeal to segments of the

population who do not celebrate Christmas, and those that superficially observe the holiday. I believe this Christmas compromise disrespects all religions and threatens the spirit of community goodwill. Most people of strong religious convictions (whatever their faith) are strong enough in their faith to allow others to publicly celebrate their respective holidays. "Happy Chanukah!" is not hate speech. Neither is "Merry Christmas!" By removing all religious references, retailers who secularize Christmas deny communities the benefit of important spiritual and charitable gifts.

This year, Target stores have chosen a controversial approach to Christmas retailing. They have decided to bar the Salvation Army from entrances to their stores. Never mind the fact that collected funds are efficiently distributed to those who need it most. In the words of Ebenezer Scrooge, "Bah Humbug!" These stores offer only "a poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December!" Stores that have removed all religious content from "Christmas Sales," have chosen to do without my business.

Contrast Target's position with that of Wal-Mart, and other stores, where the Salvation Army is welcome. Wal-Mart's strategic response to Target's decision is to offer a contribution to the Salvation Army that will match those contributed by Wal-Mart customers (up to \$1 Million). In addition to being the "right thing" to do, I am sure this strategy will be repaid many times over from the revenues generated by charitable shoppers.

It's true that stores have commercialized Christmas over the years. But we have managed to keep a religious element of the holiday in most stores. Those that use a respectful approach to religious holidays will receive the praise and patronage of customers who value their beliefs. By adopting this time-tested approach to holiday retailing, businesses can better serve society and help to promote "goodwill toward men."

Merry Christmas! "God Bless Us, Every One!"

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