

The Overlooked Role in Marketplace Christianity: You, the Customer

Typically, when we talk about marketplace Christianity, we're referring to how business professionals operate in the marketplace (e.g., business owners, managers, sales professionals, service workers, etc.). But for most people, the opportunity to honor God in the business world emerges primarily on the other side of the checkout counter--as the customer.

In our quest to do business God's way, perhaps the most overlooked area of our marketplace engagement as Christians concerns the manner in which we operate as customers--that is, we who purchase products and services. This applies in both our personal shopping, and if you're running a company, this also applies to how we treat our vendors.

Whether as Christian business professionals or Christian customers, our attitudes and behaviors in the marketplace are either attracting people to Jesus or repelling them away from Him. As Christians, we ought to be the most honorable customers, and I have become convinced this is a prerequisite to doing business God's way.

Why don't we talk about the customer's responsibility in business?

You won't find many workshops on how to be a better customer ... unless the goal is to show people how to take advantage of companies (e.g., how to get stuff for free, how to get lower prices, how to participate in class-action lawsuits, what types of products/companies to boycott, etc.).

Regrettably, it has taken me several years of producing books, articles, interviews, and an entire course on the theology of business before it occurred to me that I had been neglecting to address the customer's God-given responsibilities within the broader conversation about marketplace Christianity.

Why haven't we been challenging customers to think and act more honorably toward businesses? I believe this silence is the result of widespread belief in myths such as these:

Myth #1: "The customer is always right."

The customer is NOT always right. Sometimes, customers are flat wrong ... and are even rude, egotistical, and manipulative in the process, treating product and service providers with utter contempt.

Myth #2: "Cash is king."

No, our money is not intrinsically more valuable than the work people put into providing the products and services for which we exchange it.

Myth #3: “Because businesses are more powerful than customers, only customers get exploited.”

Customers aren’t the only ones with the potential to get taken advantage of in business transactions. Frequently, it’s the employees, vendors, contractors, and small-business owners who are getting exploited by customers’ attitudes and behaviors.

Because of the internet and today’s extremely competitive markets, customers now have more power and leverage in commercial transactions than ever before. As Christian customers, we are called to be good stewards of this power, which will provide more opportunities to present Christ to our culture.

Patron vs. Exploiter

As of not too long ago, customers were typically thanked for their purchases at places of business with the statement, “Thank you for your patronage”. In fact, those who attend the Masters Tournament, one of the four major championships in professional golf, are still traditionally referred to as "patrons". This may sound old-fashioned, but there is rich meaning in this concept of *patronage*.

The root word of “patronage”, *patron*, refers to a fatherly protector of those who render products and services. When a king paid an artisan for a particular service hundreds of years ago, the king was regarded as a “patron” while the artisan was considered part of the king’s patronage.

Our calling to be patrons--rather than exploiters--is an expression of the kingly aspect of our calling to be “royal priests” in the marketplace (see 2 Peter 1:3). In addition to being protectors (one of a king’s primary roles) of our employees, co-workers, customers, etc.... as customers ourselves, we are called to protect the businesses that produce and sell the products and services we buy.

In this article, I will suggest several ways you can live out the kingly aspect of your identity as a “royal priest” through how you represent Jesus in the marketplace as a customer.

Note: This approach is based on the assumption that you actually want the company in question to remain in business. The issue of how to respond to a company that you believe shouldn’t be in business due to unethical practices will be addressed in a future article.

11 Ways to Honor God as an Honorable Customer

1. Pay on time.

Unless the company has volunteered to be your lender, please do not treat it as such by taking their products and services yet withholding on-time payment. Most companies are not in the lending business and suffer when they have to spend extra time and resources pursuing overdue payments. Of course, if you can’t afford it, don’t buy it in the first place.

2. Define what you're paying for ... and what you're NOT paying for.

Always be clear about the scope of what you're paying for. If you settled for the company's low-priced "basic" option, don't expect to reap the benefits of their "premium" option. Manage your own expectations. If there's false advertising going on, that's a separate issue.

3. Respect the brand.

Recently, I was at a well-known superstore at around 10 p.m. on a weeknight when, unsurprisingly, there was an apparent shortage of cash registers open in relation to the large amount of people waiting in the few checkout lines that were open. Frustrated, the man in front of me turned around and said, "I can't believe this! They NEVER have enough checkout lines open!"

I replied, "I guess that's how they keep their prices so low." Although I said this tongue-in-cheek, this was simply the reality. More checkout lines mean higher prices ... which is not why either of us were shopping there. No, we wanted "everyday low prices" as this company promises and delivers. Respect the company's brand promise ... not what you think their brand promise should be. If the brand doesn't align with your values or worldview, take your business elsewhere.

4. Stop the endless quest for cheaper.

Get realistic about pricing. Cheap prices usually mean someone is getting exploited down the line. Those factory workers working for virtually nothing might not be getting exploited in your own country, but somewhere, someone often is getting taken advantage of.

5. Help companies save money when reasonable.

When companies save money, they can provide better service and stay in business longer. Here are a few examples of ways you can help companies save money...

Minimize returns.

In the U.S., approximately 8% of all purchases are returned to the store. While some of these returns are the company's fault (e.g. defects, etc.), reconsider returning stuff when it's your own fault.

Read customer service information already provided.

Check the company's website and other reference sources before you pick up the phone and waste the company's time providing answers to questions that are already answered on the company's website, etc.

Use bank draft payments.

In certain businesses, paying with ACH bank draft can help vendors avoid those hefty credit card transaction fees. This is the default way I pay my company's vendors, and they greatly appreciate it. Even if it seems like the company is "big enough" to absorb the loss, aim to prevent unnecessary expenses to the company on your account. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

6. Don't bully their people.

When we pay for something, but our expectations are not met, it's tempting to unleash our frustration on

the company's employees in ways that are dishonoring to God (e.g., passive-aggressive behavior, making threats, being quick to leave a 1-star review, etc.). When something goes wrong, calmly explain the problem. Communicate with the spiritual fruit of gentleness with the heart of a peacemaker.

7. Be kind to sales professionals.

Sales professionals are faced with daily rejection at a level most of us will never experience or fully appreciate. If you're not interested in what the salesperson is offering, don't let him or her waste your time, but don't be unkind either. Politely tell the person you're not interested. Then, move on.

When you get an unwanted, sales email in your inbox, don't get angry and give a nasty reply. Simply set a filter in your inbox to prevent that person's or organization's emails from reaching your inbox. Genuine kindness in business is underrated.

8. Pray before posting/speaking a negative review in public.

Several times, I have typed a negative review for a company on Facebook, Yelp, etc. but then deleted it before posting. I restrained myself because it occurred to me that I had not done enough to allow the company to resolve the issue privately. Apply the Golden Rule when it comes to ratings and reviews. Cumulatively, these ratings and reviews can make or break a company.

9. Give constructive feedback.

If you truly want the company to succeed, let them know how they can improve. Help them get better by offering helpful suggestions for improvement. With that said, don't be condescending or angry in how you deliver the message, or you may lose credibility, rendering your potentially helpful feedback useless.

10. Walk in forgiveness.

Sometimes, companies will simply disregard our grievances. What then? First, forgive. I wrote an entire article on this subject titled "[To Forgive or Not to Forgive in Business](#)", which I highly recommend reading.

11. Praise companies publicly.

Our theology of work is revealed, in part, by our level of gratitude for the people who provide our products and services in the marketplace. Unfortunately, it never occurs to most of us to write a public review for a company unless it's about something negative.

Call to action: Right now, go and leave a nice rating and review for a company that has been making your life better yet you've never honored publicly.

Be a Christ-centered customer. Be a patron with the protective heart of God, helping companies succeed so they can continue providing value for our communities ... and so their workers can see Christ in us.

Let it be said by the clerk at your local shop that Christians are the most honorable customers.