

INTRODUCTION

You're probably going to buy something today—gas, groceries, a double-skim latte, diapers, a pack of gum, or maybe a dress or a pair of sneakers. You'll swipe your credit or debit card, or pay cash, or maybe write a check and hand it to someone standing in front of you, since we still make 90 percent of our purchases in person.

But who is that person standing across from you? Do you ever stop to think about it?

What if it were you standing behind that counter, wearing that plastic badge, your sweaty feet aching, desperate for a pee or a cold drink, counting the minutes until your break? (If you even get one.)

For two years and three months—rare in an industry with 100 percent turnover every year—that person was me. I worked for The North Face, an internationally known brand of outdoor clothing and equipment, selling merchandise in a company store in a suburban mall. From its opening in October 2007 until I left in December 2009, we were consistently among their top five bestselling stores (of sixteen, then thirty nationwide), often among the top three. With fourteen other full- and part-time coworkers, I sold shoes and sleeping bags and backpacks, jackets made of nylon and fleece, thick ski gloves and cotton caps and T-shirts

INTRODUCTION

to teachers and tourists, psychologists and athletes, surgeons and hedge-fund managers. I had never before worked retail, except for a brief teenage stint in a small Toronto drugstore where I handled the cash register and sullenly refilled shelves.

Instead, I'd spent my life as a shopper, an author, a reporter, a world traveler, a wife.

Moving to the other side of the cash wrap—that's what they call the counter where the cash registers are, where you complete your purchase—felt as disorienting to me as Alice might have felt when she slipped through the mirror into Wonderland, landing unawares in an unfamiliar world populated by Mad Hatters, rushing rabbits, chatty chess pieces, and enormous mushrooms. By moving to the other side of the register, I, too, entered a new world, one I had only glimpsed in passing since I was little.

I still remember some of the first things I ever bought with my allowance or Christmas or birthday money, like a black marble egg and an antique silver egg cup I bought in a store in Edinburgh when I was twelve, and gave to my Mom. Shopping was a special activity then.

Now everyone shops. It's a sport, a game, and an amusing and social way to kill time. But not in our family, and certainly not back in the 1960s and 1970s when I was growing up in Toronto. Then, I shopped rarely, and usually with my exotic, imperious, multiply divorced American grandmother Aline, a grande dame in raw-silk, custom-made muumuus and matching turbans topped with huge, real jewels. Granny doted on me, her only grandchild.

Shopping with Granny was a trip. She was the sort of customer that, years later as an associate myself, I would come to loathe: demanding, fussy, rich, prone to tantrums if the service failed to meet her stratospheric expectations. I can still remember, at the age of nine or ten, wanting to disappear through the floor at Holt Renfrew, Canada's 174-year-old high-end department store chain, as she pitched yet another fit over whatever had just displeased her.

INTRODUCTION

I *did* love receiving her Holt's gifts at Christmas, in those days distinctively wrapped in thick silver paper tied with cobalt-blue ribbon. I could spot a Holt's box from across the room and, like other lucky Canadians, knew it would always contain something lovely.

It never occurred to me that I'd one day be standing behind a counter myself.

My writing career had gone well from the day I graduated from college, whether I had a staff magazine or newspaper job or worked freelance. But by the fall of 2007 I was scared of the precipitous decline in my industry, journalism. I was also newly aware, after pneumonia landed me in a hospital bed from overwork, I needed a ready, steady source of cash, *something* solid.

And so I decided to join a populous, if largely ignored, tribe—the fifteen million Americans working in retail, one million of whom sell apparel.

We all have to sell ourselves, to get or keep a job or win a promotion, grant, or fellowship. Even a first date, if you like the person and hope for another meeting, is a sales job. I figured selling skills, if it turned out I even *had* any, could only be helpful in the future, no matter what I did professionally. I'd always found it difficult reaching out to new clients—who likes rejection?

The North Face sells its products worldwide through hundreds of other retailers in addition to their own freestanding stores. I knew and liked their stuff. Living in New York, at least, you see their products everywhere, from the backpacks lugged by middle-aged male commuters jamming the train into Manhattan from Connecticut or Long Island, to the wildly popular fleece and nylon jackets worn by their teenage kids, desperate for that coveted curved logo. Their products looked decent. I figured they couldn't be that difficult to sell, since so many people already knew and loved the brand.

But putting on a white plastic badge with my name carved into it proved a powerful eye-opener in many ways. I had never worked in any

INTRODUCTION

job that paid so little for such hard work. The American economy relies heavily on consumer spending—70 percent of its GDP. Yet retail sales associates, clerks, floorwalkers, team members—whatever you choose call them—remain oddly invisible in the media, even as we buy from them every day. Their lives, their needs, and their concerns, whether for safe, clean workplaces or livable wages, often go ignored, both by reporters more attentive to corporate profit projections and by the many corporations who employ millions of associates and rely so heavily on them. Most workers doing these tough jobs for low wages are those least able to afford losing them. They have a powerful incentive to remain silent.

Rarely, then, do you hear what it's really like to do this ubiquitous job, one that's practically a rite of passage for many Americans. I wanted to know more, as a journalist, a shopper, and an avid daily reader of the business press. Virtually every retail story I read quoted only Wall Street retail analysts, when it's more often the frontline workers whose energy, patience, and skills—or lack of same—so profoundly affect how we, the consumers, perceive and value a company's product or service.

In 2009, three young female reporters, one each from *The New York Times*, *Fortune*, and *SmartMoney*, went to work as retail associates, only for a week or so. Each was shocked at how hard this work is. Anyone who's put in time behind a register or rummaged through a dusty, dirty, disorganized stockroom learns quickly the gap between the shiny, brightly lit sales floor and the chaos behind the scenes.

And the median retail wage remains a crummy \$8.92 per hour, even as *one-fifth of American business is retail*, worth \$4 trillion a year. Thirty-four percent of employees work part-time, many of them with no job-related benefits.

We all shop, all the time, even if only for the barest necessities: food, medicine, toilet paper. Women make up 80 percent of shoppers, exerting tremendous influence. We deal firsthand, then, almost daily with a huge army of associates, workers earning persistently low wages at the tail end of a costly, complex global supply chain whose every twist and turn,

INTRODUCTION

including design, marketing, branding, and advertising, is chronicled by the press. Sales are consistently and zealously pumped by enormous expenditures on everything from mirrors that record a shopper's gender, age, and height to hiring a classical pianist, as Apple did in January 2010 when Leif Ove Andsnes played Janáček and Mussorgsky in their new Upper West Side location.

Yet in the great arms race to keep the American shopper spending, whether a tween snagging some leggings at Delia's or a seventy-five-year-old picking up Lipitor at CVS, the sales associate remains the most overlooked and least valued piece of the equation.

We still make 85 percent of our buying decisions only after arriving in the store. A lousy or lazy clerk can send you spinning right back onto the street, frustrated, empty-handed, and indignant—or a good one can help you happily spend all sorts of money on items you hadn't planned to purchase that day, maybe ever.

While retail associates remain the grunts of our consumption-based economy, they also, paradoxically, retain tremendous power. We've all been through it. One rude or indifferent interaction with an associate can sabotage the sexiest million-dollar ad campaign; an annoyed customer typically warns at least ten others away from a company's service or product. Add the powerful multiplier effect of social media and Web sites like targetsucks.blogspot.com, and even one lousy experience can, and does, easily go viral. Associates, and their managers, can and do every single day destroy shoppers' elusive and fickle desire to buy carefully burnished brands—or initiate and foster customer gratitude, loyalty, return business, and huge profits for their employers. Yet, despite this arguably crucial role, associates typically receive little or no respect, whether from shoppers, their bosses, or those who study, write about, or otherwise profit from their labor and skills.

Very few people pay attention to associates.

In his bestseller *Why We Buy*, retail consultant Paco Underhill, CEO of the twenty-six-year-old Manhattan firm Envirosell, devotes only

INTRODUCTION

a few sentences to these crucial human links between company and consumer. “Most firms are constantly looking to save money on labor,” he writes, and are dancing the razor’s edge between cutting their costs by reducing staff hours, and thereby possibly upping shoppers’ frustration, and confusion with poor, even nonexistent service. “Many retailers,” he adds—without further commentary—“underpay and undervalue their sales staff.”

Only by working a regular shift month after month, year after year, through holidays, back-to-school frenzies, Black Friday sales, and January returns, did I start to understand retail. And, unlike most associates, 50 percent of whom are gone within ninety days of being hired, I stayed, working part-time, for two years and three months, from September 25, 2007, to December 18, 2009.

I liked the job a lot when I started and for a long time couldn’t picture myself quitting. I liked having a set routine, a good-looking, comfortable, free company-supplied uniform, and a break from my work as a writer. I loved learning and perfecting new skills. I really enjoyed the variety of our customers and my friendly coworkers. I liked learning about the products, some of them fairly bristling with technical details, and selling them well. I appreciated being part of a small team within an international company whose products are well known and liked.

It took years for my early enthusiasm to wane, but it did. By the time I quit, giving two weeks’ notice and choosing the quietest time of the year, when associates’ hours are typically reduced in January anyway to save on labor costs, I knew they wouldn’t need me and no longer cared if they might miss me personally or professionally. My initial zeal was long gone. And by then I was running on fumes. Nothing could have persuaded me to stay. My early pleasure in the work and the products and the company couldn’t be regained or refreshed. Completely burned out, I only wanted to flee. The money was too low, our clients too spoiled and demanding, the work unceasingly dull and repetitious.

Those hiring retail associates enjoy ready access to a huge pool of

INTRODUCTION

workers, many of them, like me, experienced professionals, some even these days seeking a new career. But few associates, equally embittered and burned out by corporate gamesmanship, low pay, and dull, hard work, will ever stay long enough to gain any new skills or move up internally. Something is very wrong indeed when thousands of workers, every year, simply cycle through these jobs so quickly, many vowing never to return. Some, surely, are indeed ill-suited to the work or have been fired or move on to other ambitions. But those of us who like it and are good at it need to see a sea change in how this brutal business is often run.

Customers deserve, and want, much better. Healthy profits reward the few retailers who hire carefully, manage thoughtfully, train well and consistently, and pay associates well—and productive ones even better—and link managers' compensation to employee retention, as exemplars like Trader Joe's, Costco, The Container Store, and others have learned. As these companies know, retailing can be enjoyable and rewarding for shoppers and associates alike.

Come. Step behind the cash wrap for a while.