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WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

The customer is not always right

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Businesses that serve the public depend on their employees to present a positive image to the world. Customer engagement can define a company, and the well-worn phrase "The customer is always right" sometimes signals an employer that makes snap judgments after receiving a customer complaint without hearing the employee's side of it.

So kudos to managers at a San Tan Valley Wal-Mart who took the time to get their employee's side of a customer complaint that went viral and sparked an international Internet debate and negative attention for the retailer during the recent holiday shopping season.

Price match gone awry

The incident began December 2, 2013, when Joe Cantrell, a 34-year-old disabled former pro wrestler, attempted to take advantage of Wal-Mart's price match guarantee. According to a Pinal County Sheriff's Office report, a cashier questioned whether the ads he was using were outdated. Cantrell allegedly then cursed and threatened the cashier with physical harm. Store employees as well as other customers apparently witnessed him threatening to wait outside the store to beat up the cashier when he got off work.

Cantrell went home and posted on his Facebook page: "Tonight I almost whipped a Walmart employee's ass." Three days later, when he returned to the store, employees summoned sheriff's deputies, who issued a trespass notice and ordered him to stay off store property.

Media buzz

Cantrell took his story to a local Phoenix television station, with the angle that he was targeted for taking advantage of Wal-Mart's guarantee to match competitors'

advertised prices. Other media outlets and bloggers throughout the United States and abroad quickly picked up the story, with headlines along the lines of "Banned for life by Wal-Mart for price matching."

Wal-Mart responded forcefully to the media buzz with this official statement: "The safety of our associates and customers is our top priority, and we find threats of violence unacceptable." The company also found support from Pinal County Sheriff Paul Babeu, who issued a statement critical of the television news report. The sheriff said the report was flawed because the news station hadn't even bothered to obtain a copy of the police report.

Bottom line

Customer complaints against employees can present difficult situations for management. Good customer service and a positive public image are what bring customers in the door and give a business its reason for being.

Sometimes, though, the customers can be the bad actors in conflicts with employees. When a customer escalates a confrontation with threats of violence, the employer must draw the line to protect its employees and other customers.

With the instant bad exposure a customer's negative social media post can bring, you cannot forget that the full story can only be learned by talking with both the customer and your own staff. Standing up for your employee against an abusive customer can turn out to be a positive public relations move.

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