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**Wednesday
Morning
Fax**
from
**The
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7 ways U.S. retailers are stressing customer service

■ **Outsourcing customer-relations jobs**

The person who soothes you next time you phone in a gripe may well be sitting in front of a computer monitor many thousands of miles away.

You may not realize it, but many U.S. companies have contracted out their customer-service to highly trained English-speaking staffs in countries like India and The Philippines.

English-speaking? Make that American-fluent. In one Bangalore, India company, staffers have polished their U.S. vernacular by hours of intense studying of tapes of TV shows such as "Friends" and "Oprah."

Third-World customer-relations contractors are more affordable than homegrown services (though some still are thriving). Just as important, perhaps, overseas personnel seem to exhibit a more sympathetic attitude vis à vis complaining customers than U.S. employees.

■ **New respect for good customer relations**

Astute U.S. merchants, The New York Times observed recently, "are rediscovering the usefulness of customer service ... as a point of differentiation from their competitors."

■ **Adoption of customer-service technology**

Customers more and more avidly seek shopping speed and efficiency. And retailers have begun to respond. Sears, Roebuck, for example, is experimenting

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with kiosks that answer customer queries – and include a hot button they can push to summon a real sales clerk.

■ **Answering competition**

Hard-pressed department and specialty stores are improving customer service in the face of stiff price competition from Wal-Mart and other no-frills retailers.

■ **Asking customers what they want – and listening**

The Times writes that Hanniford Brothers, a regional grocery chain headquartered in Scarborough, Maine, discovered that customers wanted better organic and natural-foods selections. As a result, Hanniford Brothers expanded its fresh-produce sections – the kind of thing that Wal-Mart finds hard to do.

■ **Iron-clad guarantees**

Other retailers have followed L.L. Bean's 81-year-old lead by guaranteeing their wares "for the useful life of the product" and other proactive confidence-builders.

■ **Investing in customer-service personnel**

The Times reports that City Express, a Boston Courier service, created the new post of corporate customer-relations manager some time ago. It costs more, admits City Express President Aaron Dribben, but "far less than the cost of losing a client."

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