

Cost of apparent time-savers

by BROCK WEIR

Once upon a time in a land not all that far removed from today, I was on the hunt for a new couch ? nothing fancy, just something comfortable that would fit in the room and, most importantly, something that had springs which hadn't given up quite yet.

You know, the small luxuries.

I was not lacking for options as I shopped, nor was I lacking in sales people, many of whom were probably working on commission, eager to seal the deal.

In one such store, the salespeople far outnumbered the customers and it was almost hard to browse without at least one of them approaching to tell me why this was the one couch my butt simply couldn't live without, all without the luxury of a free moment to think.

Nowadays, I find myself looking back on that somewhat negative experience with a slight degree of nostalgia

I've always had a love-hate relationship with shopping for the essentials.

Readers who may have accompanied me to, or seen me at, a used book store, antiques shop, flea market or, when they were prevalent, a good old fashioned video store, may have read that last paragraph with a spit-take, but those stores are and were the exceptions.

By and large, when something's needed, I like to have a game plan before heading out. This can include my due diligence on the best brand and product that fits my needs at the best price and, if it's a place with multiple stores, like a mall, I also like to have a plan in mind that will get me in and out as quickly and efficiently as possible.

In some respects, I've always been like this.

One of the few occasions I remember as a child getting up and throwing an undisputed temper tantrum involved a trip to a now-defunct department store that, for whatever reason, drew my ire. I don't know what my aversion to this chain was at that precocious age, but three-or-four-year-old me was having none of their shenanigans ? and my resistance took the form of throwing myself onto the ground refusing to move.

Thankfully, my aversion to retail therapy no longer takes such dramatic turns, but it still manifests itself in the odd way, particularly when it comes to customer service.

Customer service. At this point, I feel some of you may feel compelled to stop reading; after all, anyone who has fished in their pocket for a loonie or swiped a piece of plastic all has their own tale to tell. But it's a relatively new trend in the grand scheme of things that's particularly frustrating.

In contrast to my experience at the furniture store little more than a decade ago, the pendulum, in my experience, has swung in a drastically different direction.

In some larger stores where customer service and sales representatives do not rely on commission, many of our more frequented retail stores are, in many respects, becoming ghost towns. That is, ghost towns when it comes to employees; customers are still coming in unabated.

While I don't dispute that there is a labour shortage in some areas of commerce these days ? and the arguments on why that might be is fodder for another column in a different week ? it's hard for larger retail employers to argue that nobody wants to work when you're walking through stores where robots, rather than employees, are cleaning the floors, and you have to self-check-out from your choice of more than 20 bleak kiosks when just one of 12 full-serve face-to-face checkout aisles is actually open and being operated by a human.

Recently, I was at one such establishment that had no less than 26 self-checkout kiosks in two separate clusters, apparently overseen by just one harried human.

While my preference is to always, as much as possible, support my fellow humans and the jobs they hold by spending an extra few minutes in line waiting my turn, time on this particular day did not allow me to join a line of approximately 17 people to pay for my pack of AAA batteries, bag of grapes, four bottles of sparkling water and jar of peanut butter.

The water scanned just fine, but things took a turn with the peanut butter, which somehow scanned three times. The employee, already at his wit's end dealing with four other kiosks that were experiencing problems, got to me within two or three minutes, so that was fine. Then, it was time for the batteries? which, on the screen, came out as a 10kg bag of soil that was considerably more expensive and woefully less able to power my voice recorder and remote control.

But the employee was nowhere to be found ? and it was a good 10 minutes before the issue was solved, all as I wistfully watched the 17 people in the other line glide gracefully through and out towards the parking lot.

A few days later, late into the evening when most things had closed, I headed to the only retailer that happened to be open to get a carton of milk for the next morning. A simple enough task, but, as far as I could see, there wasn't a single employee available in the store. Self-checkout was the order of the evening, until it wasn't, and the item wouldn't scan. With nobody else around, there was little other option to put the milk back in the dairy case and go on my way.

But, last weekend, another experience buoyed my spirits ? looking for a few things for dinner, I went into a chain grocery store in Vaughan and took in a rare and remarkable sight: a full-size grocery store with not a single solitary self-checkout to be had.

While one had to exercise a small degree of patience in line, I have to say that the gratitude I felt as I put my groceries on the belt, being able to exchange a smile and have a brief conversation with an actual person, face-to-face, was well worth the wait.

It was a very human experience, and one that seems, sadly, on trend to be slowly but surely phased out, all in the name of argued efficiency and a quick dollar.

Yet, the experience was such a positive one, I think I'm going to seek them out here on out, while we still can, and before the sure and anything-but-slow march of A.I. makes these experiences, interactions, and even employment opportunities obsolete.

Human interaction was what the majority of us missed the most during the height of the pandemic. Now that we have it back in so many ways, let's cherish it before we're in danger of losing it.