

# Counter Culture

It probably is not that far from reality to say the era of “pen pals” has passed us by. We communicate with many people every day via a multitude of vessels, e.g., phone, e-mail, blogs, tweets, texting and face-to-face (hard to believe at times), among others. Well, I was one of those youthful minions who actually did have a pen pal; I spent a great many hours writing to Mario Rupresario in his small community outside of Rome. Once I went to college, communication ceased, until later in life when I visited Italy several times and was able to meet Mario (and spend time with him and his family).

A pen pal in today’s world does not really apply. However, one can certainly develop corresponding relationships with myriad individuals via today’s technology. One such relationship I enjoy is with an individual named Craig Wilson. He writes a weekly column in the Life section of *USA Today* titled “The Final Word.” Craig is a “life experience” (probably the best kind) type of guy and relates this through his column. Not all apply to each of us, but at least some do. Craig and I exchange thoughts and comments about those that I see as relating directly to my life. His weekly column is something to look forward to when you spend the majority of your life “on the road” as I do.

A recent column centered on Craig’s reflections on a book titled “Counter Culture: The American Coffee Shop Waitress.” The author, a career professional waitress, relates her stories and experiences provided from a lifetime of serving the public, i.e., the customer. One of the main philosophies that drove her career and success was that by

the time a patron had visited her shop three times, she considered him or her a regular, knew the customer’s name, meal preferences, if there was an illness in the family or other life concerns, and what was of importance to her new “regular.” I found my interpretation of the primary

meaning of the book skewing toward our industry, and how one of our primary goals in operating a retail entity within our sector is the very simple fact that we will find success only when we become a habitual part of our customers’ daily lives.

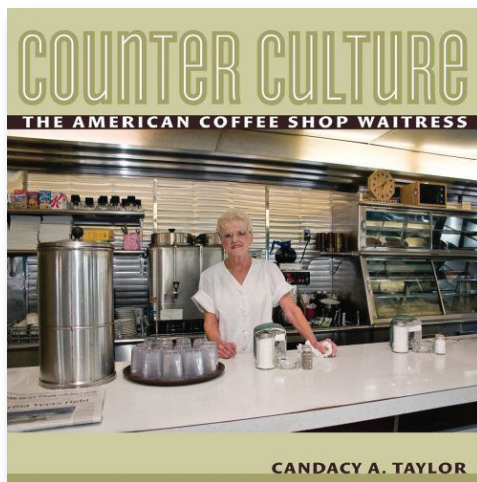
## The Store Is Our Stage

Our store is the backdrop/stage incorporated into a production in which each of us have a role. The customers are each playing their roles. It is from this ongoing theatrical

production that experiences are created and a daily aspect of life is fulfilled. It is our mission as operators to create experiences for our customers.

Experience creation can be very subtle in its execution but powerful in its impression. One industry icon prided itself in acknowledging each fuel customer once he activated a dispenser on the forecourt. That acknowledgment served multiple purposes, but one thing it did in the customer’s eyes was to personally greet him or her. Yet that known habit of the company has disappeared. Why has such a small, easy action being taken out of the “employee handbook”? It is so easy for our front-line associates to initiate simple actions that create longstanding and meaningful experiences: greeting each customer within the first two steps of entering the store, having direct eye contact, saying thank-you in a way that is interpreted as being real, and so many other simple actions. It is the creation of counter culture, which results in the production of totally fulfilling customer experiences. It is the combined effect of these experiences that turns the public into people who turn into customers who turn into friends—the lifeblood of our business.

Yes, it does appear that everything good and meaningful takes place on a very basic level. ■



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