



Curtailed control

PHOTOGRAPHY HAS BEEN an important creative outlet to me for more than 30 years, ever since I first picked up a Kodak Instamatic 126 camera. Beginning in the early 1980s, I started using Pentax equipment, and, over the past two decades, I've amassed quite a col-

lection of 35-mm and 6×7 medium-format bodies, lenses, flash units, and other gear. You can imagine how delighted I was, therefore, to hear this spring that Pentax was set to introduce in the summer its first digital SLR, the 6.1M-pixel *ist D.

I subscribe to an active and "passionate" (to put it nicely) Pentax discussion group, and in late August, I heard through it that the *ist D was available for preordering on the Web site of Adorama Camera, a large New York retailer. Predicting the *ist D's popularity and initially scarce supply and forecasting that Adorama was likely to get a disproportionately large share of that initial supply, I immediately placed an order. One month later, the *ist D started showing up in stores around the world, and I assumed that my order would be soon be filled.

Days turned into weeks, and my camera didn't arrive. E-mails and phone calls to Adorama were met with claims of no inventory and repeated promises of "maybe tomorrow." At first, I thought that Pentax might be having supply problems. But, after encountering increased evidence of *ist D stocking at much smaller retailers, I knew Pentax itself wasn't to blame. By phoning Adorama and posing as a New York resident interested in the *ist D but not wanting to waste a subway ride across town, I learned from a store salesperson that, in fact, Adorama had "plenty" of *ist Ds in stock. He couldn't explain why my online order was being held up, though. And when I subsequently complained to

Adorama in an e-mail, the store abruptly canceled my order without explanation.

What's the reason for Adorama's behavior toward me and other members of the Pentax discussion list who had similar experiences? I suspect that the retailer was selling every camera it could off the store shelves and prioritizing those potentially more lucrative transactions. A skilled salesperson might be able to convince a walk-in customer to buy not only the camera

HOW IMPORTANT ARE CUSTOMER SERVICE AND OTHER INTANGIBLES TO TODAY'S CONSUMER?

body but also a lens or two, a case, a flash unit, some high-profit-margin batteries, CompactFlash cards, and perhaps even a tripod and other accessories. Keeping in mind economist and philosopher Adam Smith's theories on supply and demand, Adorama's actions are neither surprising nor necessarily illegal (though I'm no expert on the relevant laws), but they surely reflect poor customer service.

I don't blame Pentax for what happened, perhaps because my profession gives me insight into the product-development and -production processes. This situation reminded me of just how much companies rely on their suppliers, sales channels, and other partners to put together a winning product that delights customers and leads to repeat business. Pentax's engineers depend on the manufacturers of discrete components, chips, software, boards, and other photo-

equipment building blocks to robustly test these products before shipping them to Pentax and to ship them in sufficient quantities to meet Pentax's manufacturing-volume expectations. And Pentax depends on its diverse sales channels to treat customers fairly and professionally. If any of the links in the chain breaks, Pentax ends up with a black eye.

My experience also left me wondering, in this modern era of CNET's Shopper.com, Google's Froogle, mySimon, Techbargains, and other bargain-announcing and price-comparing sites, how important are customer service and other intangibles to today's consumer? Is it all just about who has products in stock at the right time and at the lowest price, as Adorama's attitude suggests? Or, as the services provided by Web sites such as Epinions.

com imply, are factors beyond price important to consumers' short- and long-term buying patterns?

Now, I'd like to turn the soapbox over to you. But first, as the fires in Southern California the week I wrote this editorial indicate, complete control of your environment is nothing more than an illusion. When I speak of control, I use the term relatively. With that clarifier in mind, how do you manage your suppliers and distributors to ensure that the end customer has a positive experience with your products? How much does the "price-above-all-else" philosophy factor into your product-planning and -development decisions as an engineer? And how does it factor into your product-purchasing decisions as a consumer? Thanks in advance for your insights. □

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