

Flirtatious customers prompt grievance against Safeway

Employees say 'service-with-a-smile' policy is causing shoppers to proposition them

By Kim Curtis
The Associated Press

MARTINEZ, Calif. — Service with a smile has become a nightmare for some Safeway employees who are grimacing at the supermarket chain's policy of cheery customer relations.

Thirteen workers have filed grievances over Safeway's smile-and-make-eye-contact initiative, complaining they've been propositioned by shoppers who mistake the company-imposed friendliness for flirting.

"Let ME decide who I am going to say hello to with a big smile," said Richelle Roberts, a produce clerk at a Lafayette store who complains she's propositioned daily by male customers. "A woman knows where and when not to open that door for certain men."

Under Safeway's unwritten "Superior Service" initiative, employees are expected to anticipate customers' needs, be courteous, escort them to items they cannot find, make selling suggestions, thank them by name if they pay by check or credit card and offer to carry out their groceries.

Safeway, which is based in Pleasanton and is North America's second-largest supermarket chain, with 1,378 stores in the United States and Canada, began

phasing in the policy five years ago.

But it was not until January that it began enforcing it by using undercover shoppers and warning that negative evaluations can lead to remedial training, disciplinary letters and termination.

None of Safeway's 150,000 employees has been fired for failing to be friendly enough, but 100 have been sent to a daylong class, a sort of Smile School in which clerks are given pep talks and suggestions for enhancing the customer's shopping experience.

"We don't have any set rules regarding personal behavior," Safeway spokeswoman Debra Lambert said. "We're not asking an employee to smile in a certain way or make eye contact in a certain way."

But 12 women aired their grievances to Safeway executives in August and a male employee who said he has been bothered by a female customer joined the effort this week.

The United Food and Commercial Workers union also filed a complaint in May with the National Labor Relations Board, alleging that the Safeway's customer service policy was illegally imposed.

"They've got battalions of MBAs who are coming up with these policies at the corporate fort in Pleasanton who don't take into account the real-life implications," said their lawyer, Matthew Ross.

The union wants workers, especially women, to have more freedom to choose not to make eye contact with a potentially threatening customer or to refuse to carry groceries out to a man's car at night.

Ms. Lambert said the complaints are coming only from the two San Francisco Bay-area union chapters in Martinez and Vallejo and that a survey of workers in Northern California found them generally happy with the policy.

Outside a San Francisco Safeway on Wednesday, shopper John Kruse said that the service is so uniformly smiling and attentive, "you'd have to be very narcissistic or stupid to believe that the flattery was personally directed at you."

"I think if the women are being professional, I think it's a problem with the male customers, not the employer," said Brad Becker, who recently moved here from New York. "I think it's a shame that someone would interpret courteous as flirtatious. It's not the same thing."

"I didn't feel like anyone was coming on to me," added 41-year-old Daniel Woods. Still, he said, the results of Safeway's policy can be unsettling.

"It's strange. It doesn't feel normal," he said. "I'm used to shoving and pushing my way through the aisles. It was really funny to have someone walk me to the plastic fork section."

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MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
September 21	22 7:00 p.m. Hospitality Bean West and Hamilton	23 9:00 p.m. Hats Off Dance! Ballroom	24 7:00 p.m. Bob Dylan Van Morrison Mac Court 8:00 p.m. Come Get Rec'd with Us! Ballroom	25 9:00 p.m. "Laugh It Off" Comedy Night Ballroom 8:30 - 11:30 p.m. Ballroom Dance 220 Gerlinger	26 9:00 p.m. Luau in September Ballroom	27 10:00 a.m. Making a Difference Humpy Lumpy Lawn
Week of Welcome						
28	29	30 11:00 a.m. RDA Religious Faire EMU Amphitheater	October 1 6:00 - 7:30 p.m. Club Sports Open House Fir Room	2 8:30 - 11:30 p.m. Ballroom Dance 220 Gerlinger	3 4 p.m. - 12:30 a.m. Duckfest EMU	4
5	6 4:00 - 6:00 p.m. Women's Center Women of Color Open House Women's Center Suite 3, EMU	7	8 4:00 - 6:00 p.m. Women's Center LGBT Open House Women's Center Suite 3, EMU	9 8:30 - 11:30 p.m. Ballroom Dance 220 Gerlinger	10 Noon Zero Gravity Tour '98 EMU East Lawn 4:00 - 7:00 p.m. Ballroom Dance Lessons 220 Gerlinger	11
12 7:00 p.m. Coming Out to Parents Discussion Maple Room	13 7:00 p.m. Film and Discussion MCC	14 ASUO Street Fair 6:30-10 p.m. Students of Color Reception	15 7:00 p.m. Coming Out Film and Discussion MCC	16 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. 13th Avenue 8:00 p.m. Coming Out Dance Fir Room	17	18
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