

**Oregon Daily Emerald**  
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# Perspectives

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## Not just business\$

Despite being in a hurry, or having a bad day, many customers could do well to show a little appreciation to those people who work in service jobs to make our lives easier.



Bryan Dixon Emerald



**Jonathan Gruber**

**H**e hits the curb, like, every day," said one LTD bus rider to another. "I can't believe he just left those people behind," said her companion.

On the bus, it is hard to not eavesdrop, especially when you're packed in like sardines, as other students and I are on my morning ride. That particular conversation took place at the back of the bus, probably outside driver earshot. When I have been the last person to squeeze behind the white line, however (thus making the distance from a speaking person to the driver's and my ears essentially the same), I have heard many remarks that I'm sure do not make the driver's morning any brighter.

Service jobs are perhaps the fastest-growing and least-appreciated occupations in our society. Nothing can possibly justify the treatment that many of these employees receive on a daily basis.

I think this illustrates a common assumption in our society that business transactions are simply an absolute exchange of money for services. Sure, there is not a lot of room to interpret what the \$3.99 for your hamburger meal deal entitles you to, but more than money and burgers are exchanged whenever two people talk to each other.

Paying for a hamburger does not entitle people to take out their aggression on an employee. Along with money, businesses ask for customer cooperation in making the transaction. Perhaps it's a news flash to some people, but humans are fallible. Customers should accept a certain chance of error or delay. It is only probability that determines whether that error occurs when the customer is in a hurry or having a bad day. And how the customer feels really has little to do with what the company owes him or her.

I remember, a very long time ago, seeing an employee of United Airlines jokingly tell David Letterman that at UA, "Customers are the enemy." Naturally, instead of making fun of the airline's slogan, "United Airlines — Rising," Letterman hit the "Customers are the enemy"

part pretty darn hard.

At the time I laughed at the UA employee; even if you have some customer problems, that is a joke you just do not make. Ever. Especially not on national TV. But according to National Public Radio, incidents of airline customers actively engaging in enemy-like behavior are also "rising."

Tell me, what good is it to be angry about a weather delay? What exactly can airline employees do about it? Or mechanical problems, or personnel or anything else, really? Surely any employee important enough to make decisions about whether a plane flies or not is important enough to not have to deal with bitchy passengers.

In all my travels, I have been frustrated many times. I have been screwed by airline decisions, and I have dealt with employees who could not care less if I ever made it to see my family. But nothing has ever happened that would warrant me raising my voice, let alone justify assaulting anyone.

Another factor that makes a service person's life hell is that customers are constantly competing with each other. We seem to think in our society that our own convenience is somehow more important than that of other people, and we need to prove it. When someone wins, the loser takes it out on the employees.

In my experience, something about water being offered for free in a restaurant makes customers view ordering it differently from all other food and drink. I remember several occasions when I was mid-order and another "customer" just butts in to say, "Hey, I need a glass of water." In general, the person most upset about this is the first one, who stood in line to be able to order. And there is no explanation that will make the interrupter understand,

whether it is my boss or me offering it.

I have often wondered what makes me so employee-sympathetic. I like to think that part of it is my gentle, unassuming nature; but, given that my nature is not completely gentle or unassuming, I think that the more likely explanation involves being on the service end of thousands of fast-food transactions. All in all, it was not a terrible experience at all. I liked it, most of the time. But I think that everyone should have to do it. If everyone did food service as his or her first job, I bet unruly customers would become an endangered species.

All in all, service employees are not paid nearly as much as professionals, but that doesn't mean they should be valued any less. I recommend that if you encounter an employee who screws up your order or chooses someone else over you, take it easy. It happens. I recommend that you gloat, too. When you really think about it, being the person who does not get all worked up over light catsup and extra onions makes you a more reasonable person than someone who does.

*Jonathan Gruber is a columnist for the Oregon Daily Emerald. His views do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald. He can be reached via e-mail jgruber@gladstone.uoregon.edu.*

**CORRECTION**

The story "OIEE holds international party," (ODE Nov. 8) should have read: This year, the Schumans are hosting a graduate student from Thailand. The Emerald regrets the error.