In a Recession, the Consumer Is Queen

Written by Administrator
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<p>�</p><p align="justify">�By <u>NANCY GIBBS</u> Thursday, Feb. 19, 2009</p><p align="justify">The first clue came when I got my hair cut. The stylist offered not just the usual coffee or tea but a complimentary nail-polish change while I waited for my hair to dry. Maybe she hoped this little amenity would slow the growing inclination of women to stretch each haircut to last four months while nursing our hair back to whatever natural color we long ago forgot.</p><p align="justify">Then there was the appliance salesman who offered to carry my bags as we toured the microwave aisle. When I called my husband to ask him to check some specs online, the salesman offered a pre-emptive discount, lest the surfing turn up the same model cheaper at Best Buy. That night, for the first time, I saw the Hyundai ad promising shoppers that if they buy a car and then lose their job in the next year, they can return it. (See 25 people to blame for the financial crisis.)</p> <p align="justify">Suddenly everything's on sale--even silver linings. The upside to the downturn is the immense incentive it gives retailers to treat you like a queen for a day. During the flush times, salespeople were surly, waiters snobby, as though their kanpachi tartare with wasabi tobiko might be too good for the likes of you. But now the customer rules, just for showing up. There's more room to stretch out on the flight, even in coach. The malls have that serene aura of undisturbed wilderness, with scarcely a shopper in sight. Every conversation with anyone selling anything is a pantomime of pain and bluff. Finger the scarf, then start to walk away, and its price floats silkily downward. When the mechanic calls to tell you that brakes and a timing belt and other services will run close to $2,000, it's time to break out the newly perfected art of the considered pause. You really don't even have to say anything pitiful before he'll offer to knock a few hundred dollars off.</p><p align="justify">Some places figured out that children, those adorable cash suckers, could clear a passage into our pocketbooks, beyond the old kids-eat-free-on-Tuesday promotions. Colorado's Aspen-Snowmass ski resort arranged for kids to fly free and threw in lift tickets for those accompanied by a paying adult. (Read "How To Know When The Economy is Turning Up.")</p><p align="justify">Restaurants are caught in a fit of ardent hospitality, especially around Wall Street: Trinity Place offers $3 drinks at happy hour any day the market goes down, with the slogan "Market tanked? Get tanked!"--which ensures a lively crowd for the closing bell. The "21" Club has decided that men no longer need to wear ties, so long as they bring their wallets. Food itself is friendlier: you notice more comfort food, a truce between chef and patron that is easier to enjoy now that you can get a table practically anywhere. And tap water is fine, thanks. New York Times restaurant critic Frank Bruni characterizes the new restaurant demeanor as "extreme solicitousness tinged with outright desperation." "You need to hug the customer," one owner told him.</p><p align="justify">There's a chance that eventually we'll return all this kindness with the profligate spending the government once decried but now would like to harness to restart the economy. But human nature is funny that way. In dangerous times, we clench and squint at the deal that looks too good to miss, suspecting that it must be too good to be true. Is the store with the supercheap flat screens going to go bust and thus not be there to honor the "free" extended warranty? Is there something ... wrong ... with that free cheese? Store owners will tell you horror stories about shoppers with attitude, who walk in demanding discounts and flaunt their new power at every turn. They wince as they sense bad habits forming: Will people expect discounts forever? Will their hard-won brand luster be forever cheapened, especially for items whose allure depends on their being ridiculously priced?</p><p align="justify">There will surely come a

day when things go back to "normal"; retail sales even inched up in January after sinking for the six months previous. But I wonder what it will take for us to see those $545 Sigerson Morrison studded toe-ring sandals as reasonable? Bargain-hunting can be addictive regardless of the state of the Dow, and haggling is a low-risk, high-value contact sport. Trauma digs deep into habits, like my 85-year-old mother still calling her canned-goods cabinet "the bomb shelter." The children of the First Depression were saving string and preaching sacrifice long after the skies cleared. They came to be called the "greatest generation." As we learn to be decent stewards of our resources, who knows what might come of it? We have lived in an age of wanton waste, and there is value in practicing conservation that goes far beyond our own bottom line.</p><p align="justify">Source: http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1880629,00.html</p>