

If You Clean My Superwoman Outfit, You Should Know My Name

By Anne M. Obarski

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What one outfit do you own that when you put it on you say, "I look good!" ? It might be the outfit that you got the job on the first interview. It might be what you wore when you made a dynamite presentation. Maybe it was what you wore when you proposed.

Whatever the outfit, it is important to you. I have a pale pink silk jacket that I just love. I had my picture taken in it for my business cards and I have worn it frequently to do presentations in when a bright color might be too strong. When I put that jacket on I feel wonderful! I pray that it doesn't go out of style for a few more years because I just love wearing it.

As fate has it, sometimes something terrible happens to those "things" we love best. So it was with my pink jacket. I happened to have just brushed a blue ink pen on the front of the jacket, close to the hip area. I thought to myself, "Doesn't hairspray take out ink spots?"

Sure it does. So I carefully used some hairspray on a cloth and rubbed gently on the spot. No need to take this to the cleaners for such a small spot. Well, you guessed it. That small spot grew. Now it was a bigger wet spot with a bigger blue spot smack in the center.

I had the worst feeling in the pit of my stomach. Why hadn't I just taken it to the cleaners? They can do magic! But now I was too afraid to tell them what I had done.

I couldn't wear it the way it was and I didn't have a choice because I was not getting rid of it.

I took it to the dry cleaner that I had been dealing with for at least 14 years. This dry cleaner is very plain and like most, is located in a strip center. As you come in through the front door, it has a small area with a couple of white plastic patio chairs and a fixture of men's ties that is never filled. Always wondered why a dry cleaner would sell ties anyway! There is usually music playing loudly from an old "boom box:" and the door is always propped open, as they have no air conditioning.

The ownership has only changed hands once and the girl who works behind the counter has been there since the beginning. She is very quiet and never makes any eye contact. She processes items without ever taking a good look at what is brought in. I often thought I could bring in a dead cat with my husbands' shirts and she would probably tie him up and throw him in the pile with the rest of the "light starch, on hangers" group.

I walked in and carefully laid my jacket on the counter and was ready to be questioned about what I had done to the jacket and was even ready to take some well-deserved scolding. Instead, she never looked up, just said, "name". Stop right there. Name? I have been bringing in laundry weekly for 14 years. I just figured out that over that time I have probably given them about \$8400 worth of

business and she doesn't know my name??? Then she says, "Phone number?" Ok, I figure that if she doesn't remember my name she surely doesn't remember my phone number. She continues to fill out those pressure sensitive slips without looking up. I quietly mention that the jacket has a stain I need taken out. She quickly flips the jacket around and says, "Did you try to do something to this stain?" I now feel the size of a 5-year-old that has to tell mom what a mess she has just made. I relate the story and she just rolls her eyes. She pulls out a yellow sticker and slaps it on the jacket and throws it over in the pile. My heart sank. My beautiful pink jacket was just another hassle to be dealt with.

She handed me the infamous "pink slip" and told me it would be done in a week.

I prayed they could get the stain out but she never said one way or another. I made sure I picked up my jacket that next week. I came in and was greeted the same way as usual. I didn't check my jacket but I was sure they had done their "magic" and placed it in that clean plastic bag ready for me to be "superwoman" in it once again.

When I got home I checked the jacket and it had one of those nasty little tags that says, "Sorry we tried to get the stain out and this is the best we could do". Sorry? You have got to be kidding. I checked out the stain and the ink was gone but the ring was about three inches wide and looked like a flashing beacon when I put it on.

Well maybe I could wear it grocery shopping because I surely couldn't wear it to do business presentations in. My poor jacket hung in my closet for months. I knew I would never find that color again and I told myself it was a lesson learned. I do that frequently when I mess up.

A few months later I had to drop off my son's band uniform to different cleaner. The high school had chosen this cleaner because they did excellent work. I didn't use this cleaner because I had heard they were "too expensive". I remembered that pink jacket just hanging in the closet, and I asked if I brought it in if they could take a look at it. The lady was wonderful. She told me about the cleaners and about the man that does all of their dry cleaning. She said he has been doing this for 30 years and she knew he could fix my jacket. I took her up on her offer and brought my jacket in, still in the plastic bag. She looked at it and said, "I don't think this will be a problem at all".

I was walking on air as I left that cleaner. I trusted what she said and I knew why they charged a little more than the other area cleaners did. They had someone who cared about my clothes and me! When I went back to get my jacket I was anxious to see if he could do the magic she promised. She took the jacket out of the bag for me to inspect.

You guessed it. There wasn't a hit of a spot or mark or anything on that beautiful silk jacket. Pro-Cleaners in McMurray, PA knew how to clean my superwoman outfit. They have won my trust and my business for my special clothes. My picture in my pink jacket is even on my website. Do you think that is good PR?

There are lessons for all business owners to learn in this story. Here are just a few:

1. Know your repeat customer's name!
2. Great each customer with eye contact and a smile!
3. Create a pleasant atmosphere in your store.
4. Be empathetic with your customers and their problems.
5. If you can't fix a problem, let the customer know and make suggestions where they can go for a solution.
6. Hire nice people, not people you have to train to be nice.
7. Remember that word of mouth advertising can make or break your business.
8. If your prices are higher than your competition, let your customers know why.
9. Reward your loyal customers.

10. Reward your loyal employees.

Customer retention practices have become the main survival tool of companies successfully riding out the current market slowdown. Focus on ways to retain and multiply your "super" customers! Remember it's more than just cleaning a costume!

Anne M. Obarski is the "Eye on Retail Performance". She is an author, professional speaker, retail consultant and Executive Director of Merchandise Concepts. Anne works with companies who are performance, profit and people focused and helps leaders see their businesses through their customers' eyes. Anne's mystery shoppers have secretly "snooped" over 2000 stores searching for excellence in customer service. Reach Anne at <http://www.merchandiseconcepts.com> or <mailto:anne@merchandiseconcepts.com>

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