

Dime Store Narratives

by

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Dime Store Narratives

My parents own and operate a dime store in Morgantown, Kentucky and have done so since 1975. My father runs "Harp's Variety Store" with help from my mother, myself, my younger sister and two employees. The store is like a small K-Mart and is my familys' sole livelihood.

With thirty years of retail experience behind him, my father has lots of stories from all the stores he has worked at and has shared them with the family for as long as I can remember. He has worked for different companies over the years including T.G.&Y. and Kresgee's, the company that now owns K-Mart, and in many cities including Evansville, Illinois and Shreveport, Louisiana.

Often, during the ^{our}course of a business day, something will remind him of something that happened in the past and he'll tell stories, usually funny, about the retail business.

One story my father likes to tell is about the new employee being sent down the street to borrow another store's counter stretcher. This happened when he was the assistant manager at the Kresgee store in downtown Evansville. The story goes that while working on a counter display, a new employee found he needed more room and was told by another employee that he needed a counter-stretcher. So off he went to a nearby store to borrow their counter-

stretcher. The manager of that store told him that they had loaned theirs out to a store down the street and to try there. This went on with the man going to about four different stores in town when finally one of the managers told him there was no such thing as a counter-~~stretcher~~^{stretcher}. This story gives a lot of insight into the retail business thirty years ago and also can be applied to retailing today because this type of initiation rite can be found still.

Another story my father has told often is the time he found a snake in with a shipment of real easter baskets. Sounds like shades of the department store snake legend, doesn't it?

My father has lots of stories about how a particular store was run and how much merchandise was bought and sold. He also tells about all the fad items that have been marketed over the years and how well they sold. Although he probably didn't enjoy it at the time, he loves to tell about the problems associated with the selling of live animals such as turtles and parakeets.

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These stories aren't just talked about at random; there are certain times when they're brought up and certain people are told. A lot of times a situation at our family store lends itself to story from my father. For instance, one day I was making signs to put on sale merchandise and I was having a bit of difficulty making the letters the same size with a fat magic marker. This brought a story from my father about how signs were made at the store in Evansville. It seems there were two people who did nothing all day but make signs; the store had its own small printing

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setup that included a small printing press. Since I never saw this store, it was very interesting to hear about life in a big department store compared with what I know about life in a small store.

These stories of my father's do more than inform me about the workings of a retail store years ago, they also tell me about my father. I can get an idea about the kind of work he did, what kind of a person he was then and they also tell why we do certain things at our store now. Things my father learned thirty years ago are still used by us today: ways of displaying certain items, the way our store is laid out, etc.

While my father has a large repertoire of stories from all the stores he's worked at, I think my family has an equal amount of stories from our store in Morgantown. We have favorite stories we tell over and over and it seems we tell these stories at supper, during and after, after a day at the store. Usually we talk about the dumb things customers ask for or do.

For instance, each member of the family and our employees have lots of stories about how difficult it is to cut window shades for customers. We have a machine that does the actual cutting but the hard part is trying to get the customer to tell us how wide they want the shade. Many tell us they want a shade to fit a "regular" window. It's amazing to us that they don't realize that there is no regular window size and that we just can't guess at the measurements. Sometimes they will gesture with their hands how wide the window is and we have to explain that we need the exact measurements to insure proper fitting of a shade.

A similar problem arises when we sold contact paper by the yard instead of in the prepackaged three-yard-rolls they come in now. Customers have come in to purchase contact paper to cover kitchen shelves or a set of shelves and when asked how much they needed, would reply, "Enough to cover six shelves in my kitchen." Of course, we would have no idea as to how many shelves they had and how much paper they would need so we would have to convince them to go home and measure so they would have an idea as to how much to buy.

Another favorite story is about the difficulty and the humor in the way customers pronounce things. For example, a woman came in one day and asked where the "tine-oil" was. Well, I had no idea what she was talking about so I asked her again and got the same answer. After getting the same answer the third time, I realized I would have to ask her what it was used for because then I might be able to understand what she wanted. She answered me with, "You know, that stuff you take for headaches, tine-oil! (Tylenol!)"

We also have had people ask for vanilla instead of manila envelopes and once a man asked me where the pens were, so I directed him to the writing pens and found out he wanted a cooking pan. Since we are not from this part of Kentucky, it has taken some time to get used to the way people pronounce things.

While a lot of our stories deal with the problems customers give us, there are just as many stories about funny things that happen at the store. One favorite story was told by one of our employees about a lady that came in to buy a second skimpy nightie that had fringes all over it.

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She had bought one just days earlier, but said her husband had chewed some of the fringes off and she laughingly said she needed another one. We refer to this story as the lady and the naughty nightie because that's what my father calls those skimpy nighties.

Another story we like is about some friends of ours and their three-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Katie. One day Katie and her mom came in to buy her a pair of houseshoes. Each pair of shoes was hooked together by a loop of strong plastic thread to prevent mixing of sizes and loss of a mate. Katie found a pair she liked and tried walking around in them but found she couldn't take regular steps with them, so she kept them on and shuffled around the store with the shoes hooked together, unable to move her feet more than an inch at a time.

These stories my family tells and talks about give us the opportunity to discuss the days' activities at the store in a humorous way. We can let off steam by talking about difficult customers and usually one story leads to another and to stories from the past from my father. A lot of times stories about habitually difficult customers lead to suggestions as to how to deal with them. Not only does the family discuss these stories, but also our employees do. The store is significant to our employees for obvious reasons and to us because it's our livelihood. It's important to discuss the business because problems arise in small stores as well large ones and the only way to find out about them is to talk about them. These stories gives us insight as to how our customers think and how to better serve them and the stories are enjoyable. They provide us with an enjoyable way to discuss our business.