

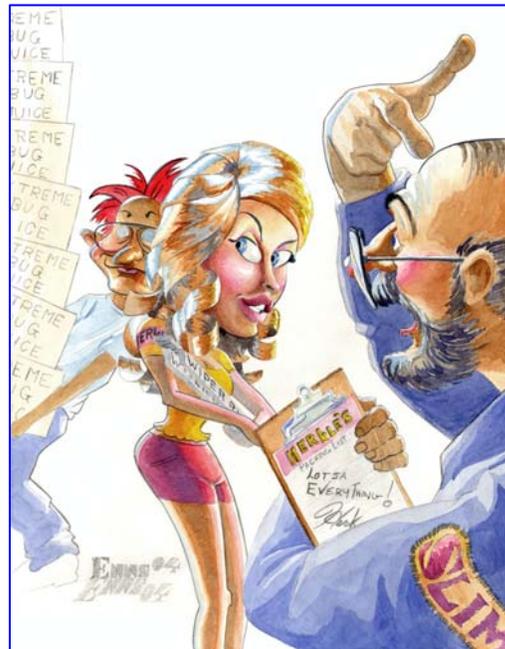
Product paralysis

By Rick Cogbill
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“Here, let me top up that coffee for you, Beanie.”

I figured I might as well empty the pot. It was due for its monthly rinse anyway.

“You bet.” The Bean held out his mug and I started pouring. A sudden flash of color caught my attention as the parts truck disappeared around the corner of the building. Unfortunately, Beanie also disappeared, and I was now pouring coffee onto the floor.



“Hey, watch it!” growled Tooner. “You’re fillin’ up my boots!”

Basil chuckled. “Looks like Beanie is more interested in the ‘elixir of love’ than in your Java, Slim.” He was referring to the blond-haired, blue-eyed female delivery driver, Samantha (everyone called her Sam), and the grip she had on Beanie’s heartstrings. They weren’t exactly an item, but so far Sam had survived two dates with our apprentice, and that had to count for something.

I sighed. “She’s bringing up the weekly parts order. I’d better go see what I’ve been billed for this time.”

Herkle’s Auto Parts is our main supplier. Herk and I go back a long ways, so I like to stay loyal. In the beginning, he came by every two weeks, wrote up an order, and the stock arrived the next day. As we became computerized, hours were spent building an inventory database. It got to where we could print off an automatic re-order list and fax it down to Herkle’s Auto Parts ourselves.

That only lasted about six months. Herk showed up on our doorstep once again with his order book in hand. “It’s called personal service, Slim,” he muttered gruffly. “I don’t want my best customer thinkin’ we don’t care.” The real problem, I suspected, was that our computer-generated lists were much shorter than Herk’s handwritten ones. There was no opportunity to up-sell.

Walking into the shop, I found Beanie packing in case after case of windshield washer fluid and Sam was close behind with an armload of wiper blades. “Morning, Sam,” I nodded, as I surveyed the growing stack of parts. “I see we’re traveling heavy today.”

She threw me a smile. “Hey, don’t shoot the delivery girl! I’m just doing my job.”

“I know, I know,” I sighed, “but pretty soon I’m going to have to build a bigger parts room. What’s the matter? Is Herk running out of storage space back at the store?”

She fluttered her eyelashes. “You’ll have to take that up with him; I just drive.”

That sounded like a good idea, so I dialed him up. “Hey, Herk,” I said into the phone. “What’s with all the bug juice and wiper blades? I’m sure we won’t use that much in a week.”

“Relax, Slim,” he replied. “It’s summertime; you don’t want your customers running low on washer fluid in the middle of a holiday, do you? Besides, I’m just passing on a great deal from my warehouse.”

I glanced at the carton. “Yeah, but -40 Celsius, suitable for Extreme Winter Conditions? I think someone overbought last fall.” I looked at the invoices in my hand. “And what’s with all these pre-molded heater hoses? I don’t remember ordering those!”

He cleared his throat. “Well, I know how you hate waiting for the right part when a customer gets towed in, so I’ve put in the 30 most common numbers...”

“I’ll learn to wait,” I growled. Right then Beanie was rolling in a set of tires. I almost dropped the phone. “Hold it! Back...put them back! I definitely do not stock studded snow tires in July!”

Herk tried to explain the easy payment plan he had in mind, but I wasn’t in the mood to listen. It took half an hour, but I finally sent Sam on her way back downtown, her truck loaded with more than half the parts she came with. Beanie had to pack everything back outside to her truck, but as you can imagine, he didn’t mind at all.

I needed something to calm me down, so I went looking for a soft drink from the vending machine. It was a big mistake. Wally, the soda truck driver, was just wheeling in his handcart. “Yo, Slim, how’s it grooving? I’m gonna stock you up with extra product, ‘cuz I hear it’s gonna be a hot one next week.” He winked knowingly. “I don’t want you to run out! Besides, I’ve got a real hot deal when you buy 25 cases or more...”

A minute later the only thing running out was Wally as he scrambled to escape my wrath. I turned to find Quigley watching me curiously from behind the service counter. “Are we having a bad day?” he asked.

“Grr!” I put my money in the pop machine. “What ever happened to only buying what you need? If I hear about another ‘volume discount,’ I’m gonna scream!”

He cleared his throat. “In that case, give me a minute before you read this note from your wife. I’ll be right outside when you’re done!”

I glanced at the piece of paper he handed me. It read: “Hi Sweetie! Could you stop by MunchMart on your way home? They have a case lot sale, and I’d like a dozen big cartons of toilet paper.”

Case lot closed.