

Atheist can't believe he can get a discount without faith

By Christopher Guntz

It's hard to miss all the car ads these days. Everyone wants to sell you a vehicle, and everyone has a gimmick. One dealer offers low finance rates - "for well-qualified buyers." Another offers special discounts for returning owners of its own brand. Still another offers \$500 off a car purchase for members of the military. Sounds discriminatory, doesn't it?

At the movie theater, I could get a discount if I were under 13 years old, or a senior citizen. Since I'm neither, I'll have to attend a matinee show to save a few bucks on the movie ticket.

Businesses use all kinds of marketing gimmicks - from coupons to social media promotional codes - to entice shoppers. Some deals are more enticing than others. Years ago, a car dealership placed a Yellow Pages coupon offering \$100 off on any car and neglected to state "one coupon per transaction." One enterprising customer gathered 64 coupons from friends' and relatives' phone books and argued successfully for a more than \$6,000 savings off her car. The dealership wisely posted a correction after that, but had to honor the truth-in-advertising policy on that first transaction.

A Lancaster County, Pa., restaurant must now do battle of its own over a seemingly innocuous promotion. Sharon Prudhomme's Lost Cajun Kitchen in Columbia, Pa., placed an ad in local church bulletins. Like many restaurants and bakeries that do such advertising, it offers a 10 percent discount for those who bring in the bulletin.

She hoped that folks heading home from a religious service might stop by the diner on what is typically a slow day for business.

Enter one spoilsport: John Wolff, atheist and member of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, filed a complaint against the restaurant because, since he doesn't go to church, he says he cannot get the discount. Let's set aside the fact that Wolff admits he has never been to Prudhomme's Lost Cajun Kitchen and so he has never had occasion to be discriminated against in said establishment; Prudhomme and ministers at local churches note there is nothing to stop him from picking up a bulletin at any local church - without staying for the church service - and getting the discount. Apparently, Wolff doesn't have to sing for his supper, but he's howling away anyway.

It's just inane. Certain coupon fliers get sent by direct mail houses to certain areas. If an establishment I want to patronize advertises in one of these local editions doesn't deliver the coupon to my home, does that mean I have been discriminated against because the discount was only offered to people who live in certain ZIP Codes? No. If customers are resourceful, they can look around for copies of the coupon, or perhaps find one online. Similarly, if Wolff or others were friendly enough, he could ask a manager at a restaurant for the discount, noting that he realizes they offer a discount and he was not able to pick up the coupon. Would they still offer the discount? Some do, and the Lost Cajun Kitchen probably would, too.

The saddest part of all of this is that it reveals the increasing animosity between secularists and people of faith. From the billboards that peppered the Baltimore area in late 2009 asking, "Are you good without God?" to the increasing ways that those who bring a religious and moral perspective to society are discounted and discredited, secularism seems to be becoming the "religion" established by the state. This bulletin flap is just the latest skirmish, and the fight surely isn't over.

It's a shame, really, that something as simple as a diner discount has turned into a battle royal. All Prudhomme wanted was to get some diners in the seats, and she wasn't particularly concerned with whether they were the sheep of any given flock or not. Instead she has to deal with a Wolff.

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