

“Free” deals can cost us part of our dignity

By Christopher Guntz

There’s no such thing as a free lunch, the saying goes. And really no such thing as free Slurpees or free cupcakes. There’s always a catch.

Last week, 7-Eleven stores offered free frozen drinks to entice customers to try its new light-version Slurpee. And we’ll bet that most folks who came in for a free drink also bought a hot dog, or a bag of chips or another snack. So, really, that eight-ounce drink ended up not being “free” for most customers who spent more than they might otherwise have planned.

It’s the same way with many “free” offers, including buy-one-get-one-free offers. We end up buying more than we expected to, just to get the bargain. Months back, folks lined up around the block waiting more than an hour for a free baked delight at a D.C.-area cupcake store featured on TV. It was one free cupcake, for goodness sake, and many of those waiting in line were professionals for whom the time spent in line was worth far more than the few dollars they might have paid for a premium cupcake. And after all that time, plenty of them emerged with not just one pastry, but several more for which they had paid. So much for a “free” cupcake.

The 7-Eleven “free” Slurpee promotion got out of hand in Baltimore, at a store near the Inner Harbor. About 40 students at one time came into the store trying to get their free Slurpee. Another group of students followed; apparently not satisfied with a free frozen drink, they allegedly helped themselves to some candy, too, only that wasn’t part of the promotion. The owner tried to stop them from leaving with the pilfered candy, but was unsuccessful. The ones he was able to block had only taken advantage of the free Slurpee, but they were upset at being blocked, so they allegedly beat him and then left the store. And somewhere in all of this, the day’s deposit of more than \$6,000 may have disappeared, too.

Again, one wonders: Why? A candy bar or a free small drink can't be worth assaulting someone. And yet, it happens. Perhaps the convenience store chain should be better prepared for promotions such as these by limiting the number of people in the store at one time.

We're all susceptible to a good marketing deal. So, the next time someone offers you something free, think about the real cost. How much of your time or your dignity are you willing to give up for a free burger, or drink or whatever they're giving away? What else will you be enticed to buy?

The lessons: Don't get caught up in commercial hype; and let's all exercise some civility in dealing with others. A free frozen drink or a free cupcake, as tasty as they may be, should not be a license to act rudely. We all nod our heads and agree, outraged at "mob mentality," but we're likely to see the same behavior come November at "door-buster" holiday sales. We ought to be able to control our baser impulses.

People often say you get what you pay for. But in this case, the rest of us end up footing the bill for what others don't pay for. Incivility affects us all. It turns out the Slurpees weren't "free" after all.

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