

welcome

service, please

ON THE LAST DAY OF DECEMBER, I made a resolution to go on a Money Diet. On the first day of January, my refrigerator went dead. I quickly learned that the biggest problem with an expensive Brand Name refrigerator is that its breakdowns are extravagant. However, as the thing had served us elegantly and quietly for 15 years, and as I had been the one to ignore the whining noises that had been emanating from the top for the past few months, I decided the price of a new motor was justifiable, even though it

cost almost as much as a new refrigerator. I called the company; it would be weeks before someone could visit me, they said—and 15 years old? How about a new refrigerator? So I called Dr. S, a maverick appliance genius, who was working on January 1 and not hungover. The refrigerator was humming softly by January 3.

On January 4, my soufflé fell, and as soufflés rose weakly and collapsed for the next few days, it dawned on me that my technique in folding egg whites might not be the problem. I hung a thermometer in the oven, and saw that it was off by 25 degrees, which was the reason why the boys were (quite appropriately) grumbling over their pink chicken that night. I phoned the Brand Name Oven Company and they laughed sadistically, and said they could send someone out, but the repair would cost a fortune. I would be better off buying a new oven. Dr. S suggested I set the oven 25 degrees hotter and hope for the best. Which I do, anyway, when I cook, so that was an easy fix.

On January 6, the dishwasher sprang a leak. A small leak, to be sure, leaving just a tiny puddle on the floor, and the sort of thing one might easily ignore for a while, but I was trying to be responsive to signs of trouble, having learned the hard way (through the kitchen ceiling) that a leak today is a flood tomorrow. I called the Service Department for the Brand Name dishwasher. That, it turns out, was my big mistake.

The dishwasher had behaved perfectly for 15 years, scrubbing and swishing its way, night after night, through the remains of the table. The rubber lining of the door had simply given out a bit. My son jammed it back into place and fixed the leak; that should have been good enough, but no, I had to have a professional take a look. The professional did, and put in an order for a new part. It is infuriating to think of the number of times no one showed up for the second and then the third visit; or the times people showed up in the morning when they were supposed to be there in the afternoon, so no one was home; or, my favorite episode, when three different repairmen called for directions, and the whole thing was so confusing, what with trying to understand who I was talking to—“But I just told so-and-so

how to get here” “Oh? He’s coming? Then I won’t bother”—that no one arrived.

We are at the mercy of the Service Department, and the Service Department shows no mercy.

The last repairman to visit the dishwasher was so deranged that he began to kick and slam the door with such force that the latch broke off. Three months later the new latch has not arrived. In the meantime, Service has offered helpful advice along the lines of “That thing is so old you should just buy a new one.” Never mind that the machine was functioning before help arrived. The goal of the Service Department, it turns out, is to get the customer so worn out that she, like the appliance, collapses in a heap and hands over her credit card. But after that treatment, I would never give my money to the same company again.

The Money Diet was beginning to seem unlucky. I had nothing to show for all I was spending on things I had already spent a lot to buy. But where can consumers turn when things break down? We can shout and complain and whine and even, on the worst days, weep over the phone to Service, but to little avail. We can threaten lawsuits, but who has the energy? I can accept breakdowns; they are part of everyone’s life. But why is it too much to expect that things can be fixed?

The hope of a better life—if only for a few moments—is what puts us over the top in any decision to spend a lot of money. We buy things for our homes with high expectations that they are going to transform our lives: the gown that says the evening will be blissful, the car that promises a journey ahead, the tub that says you will be refreshed, the sofa that says linger a moment, the bed that says may your dreams come true, the oven that nourishes body and soul. We need to return to the days when service meant something. A breakdown in service means more than the loss of a machine. It means a breakdown in trust—and that means the loss of a relationship.



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