

The Petrol Station That Only Sold Ping-pong Balls: A Parable

Once upon a time there was a man who was driving through the Desert Road when his car ran out of petrol. He got out and started pushing and after a time he came across a petrol station which lay almost exactly at the mid-point of the Desert Road. He congratulated himself at this stroke of good fortune as he went into the service area and strolled up to the counter. The man behind the counter greeted him good-naturedly and asked him what he could do for him on this sweltering summer afternoon.

Fifty bucks worth of unleaded on pump three, please, answered the man, equally good-naturedly.

I beg your pardon? The man behind the counter, responded somewhat quizzically.

Er, some petrol please, elaborated the man, for my car which is parked next to the unleaded pump which I believe is number three in your scheme of things here.

Oh, I'm afraid we don't sell petrol here, replied the man behind the counter, who was dressed rather smartly in overalls bearing the logo of the petrol company that operated the chain of service stations that he worked in and whose name badge proudly bore the job title of Service Station Manager.

Pardon? enquired the man, with an obvious sense of disbelief.

No, you see, continued the man behind the counter pleasantly, all we have to sell here are the ping-pong balls that you can see in the display case behind you there.

Eh? uttered the man as he looked around and saw that, sure enough, all the shelves, magazine racks, pie warmers and drinks cabinets in the service area were all completely empty, save for a cardboard display receptacle which was filled to overflowing with ping-pong balls and bore a sign in day-glo colours which announced the following: Special, it said, ping-pong balls, 20c each or 6 for \$1.

That's a very attractive display, said the man admiringly, but what I want, no, what I need is some petrol for my car out there.

Well, I'm sorry that I can't help you, said the man behind the counter sympathetically, but we don't have any petrol and in fact, we've been told by Head Office quite specifically, that the only thing we're supposed to sell here are ping-pong balls. I have a letter back here somewhere. And with this the man behind the counter began searching in various drawers and cupboards for the letter.

But hang on! spluttered the man, this is a service station, you've got petrol pumps out the front and all the gear that one would expect a service station to have and you're standing there telling me that I can't buy any petrol here???

That's how it might appear from your perspective, said the man behind the counter, rather coldly this time, and, of course, you're perfectly entitled to your opinion, but as an employee of this petrol company and the manager of this service station, I have to comply with the instructions that are received from Head Office which are quite specific and offer no room for interpretation or deviation. If you would just give me a chance to find this letter I was talking about, you could read it and it would clear up any misconceptions you may have.

Misconceptions? asked the man, barely able to restrain his growing sense of incredulity. You're supposedly running a service station here, and you're trying to tell me that all you can do is sell me a dozen ping-pong balls!?

There's no need to adopt that tone, said the man behind the counter brusquely, I'll have you know that we've been selling ping-pong balls for a number of years and that we're known throughout the region as one of the premier outlets for ping-pong balls and that we pride ourselves on our high level of customer service in the purveying of our line high quality ping-pong ball products and I have several framed certificates of commendation from the Head

Office of our company out in the back office that will attest to this high standard of customer service.

But all I want to do is to buy some petrol!! shouted the man, a sense of defeat quavering in his voice.

Well I can't help you, I'm very sorry but there it is, said the man behind the counter with an air of finality.

Look, said the man, trying to remain calm, You must have some petrol somewhere on the premises, maybe some that was left over from a previous marketing thrust or something, couldn't you just go out the back and have a look?

The man behind the counter sighed. OK, fine, I'll go out the back and have a look but I must say that it's rather unlikely that we'll have any and I really do object to your attitude and you coming in here making unreasonable demands and, furthermore, I'll be right back out here at the first sign of a customer who is after ping-pong balls as we must, after all, remain true to our primary business focus.

The man stifled his objections as the man behind the counter disappeared out the back of the service area.

After about ten minutes had passed the man re-appeared carrying a can which he presented to the man for his inspection.

Well, I can tell you that this is a surprise, he said, I really didn't think that we had any of this stuff left, the man behind the counter beamed as his customer removed the screw-top lid of the can and sniffed doubtfully at its contents.

The man handed over \$20 for the can of petrol, which he thought was rather a steep price but he also considered himself to be in a situation which was somewhat bereft of available options so he handed over the money without any attempt at haggling.

He also took time to thank the man behind the counter and to apologise for any aspect of his behavior that might be considered rude or abrupt.

That's all right, said the man behind the counter forgivingly, It's just that you have to understand that my job's difficult enough without people like you coming in here, making all kinds of outrageous demands, it makes my job quite impossible, you know.

As the man reached the door carrying the can, he turned and asked the man behind the counter, Um, do you have a bucket and a squeegee so that I can clean my windscreen which is caked with dirt from the road?

The man behind the counter went red in the face and pointed toward the door. Get out before I call the police!! he shouted.

The man reached his car and filled the tank with the petrol from the can, placed the can in the boot and started off down the road. It soon became apparent that the petrol was in fact the type used for two-stroke engines like motor mowers and weed slappers and the car's engine protested this fact by spluttering and missing rather violently as he trawled slowly down the road.

When the car reached the end of the Desert Road the man pulled into another service station, got the attendant to siphon what remained of the two-stroke petrol out of his tank, filled

up with unleaded and drove home relieved to have survived his ordeal.

The next day he 'phoned up the Head Office of the petrol company that ran the service station in the middle of the desert road and asked to speak to the Managing Director. After being put through to several wrong extensions he reached the Managing Director who listened to his tale of woe and agreed that something had to be done as he had received several complaints from customers regarding this particular service station and that he would personally see to it that the situation was resolved to a satisfactory outcome.

The man hung up the 'phone satisfied that he'd done all he could humanly do to bring the problem to the attention of those whose responsibility it was to see that it be put right.

Back at the service station in the middle of the Desert Road the phone rang just as the station manager was replacing the last ping-pong ball in the display box after individually dusting and polishing each one, a strenuous and exacting activity which had taken up most of his morning so far.

He answered the phone and instinctively snapped to attention as he recognised the voice of the Managing Director of the petrol company calling from Head Office.

Just calling up to see how things are going down there, said the Managing Director affably.

Oh well, what can I say, said the petrol station manager, we have our ups and downs, you know, as well you might imagine.

Yes, well, continued the Managing Director, I heard that there was a bit of an incident yesterday, with a man who came in wanting to buy some petrol...

Oh, yes, there was indeed, unbelievable business, said the petrol station manager, and just the sort of thing that makes my job such a high stress occupation.

Well, yes, agreed the Managing Director, and don't think we don't appreciate the sterling effort that you boys put in down there, but don't you think you might avoid similar unpleasantness in the future if you kept, say, a couple of cans of petrol out the back, for contingency purposes, just in case it happened again?

Well I could... said the petrol station manager, but we don't, I mean it's not our job to...

Hey, this is in no way a criticism, you know that, said the Managing Director sincerely.

No, I see that, said the petrol station manager, and I do see where you're coming from but it's just that we wouldn't want to be seen to be setting some kind of precedent, given that it's not our role, and that we're already stretched providing our expemplary ping-pong ball service.

Quite right, concurred the Managing Director, and I've seen the latest ping-pong ball sales figures which have gone absolutely beserk in the last quarter, I don't know how you do it, really I don't, it's a great achievement on your part.

Well, we try to do our little bit down here, said the petrol station manager with ill-disguised pride.

But nonetheless, if you could see your way clear to order a few cans of petrol, for emergencies only, and supply them to customers on a best efforts basis only and with no compulsion on your part to sell them in the face of more pressing ping-pong ball related activities...

I'll see what I can do, said the petrol station manager with an air of resignation.

Good man, beamed the Managing Director, I knew I could count on you. I'll let you get back to your work.

The Managing Director hung up with a satisfied sigh, glad to have sorted out that little crisis and relieved that he could now attend to more urgent business.

And the petrol station manager put down the phone and returned to his duties smiling a smile knowing that he had the complete trust and support of Head Office management and feeling, as he doodled on a sheet of paper a draft business plan for an expansion of ping-pong ball marketing initiatives, a rare satisfaction that is only felt by those men and women who are at all times competent and customer focussed in the discharging of their various duties and tasks.