

Are Your Employees Dissing Romance Readers?

by Stephanie Bond

Romance readers are accustomed to defending the books they buy to their spouses, children, parents, friends, coworkers, et cetera. Readers know that to understand the wonderful world of romance, one has to read the genre, and they're tolerant of acquaintances who aren't familiar with the panacea of reading uplifting, romantic fiction. But the real shame is when readers are shown disrespect for their reading preferences from the very bookstore from which they make their purchase. Before you say, "My employees would never do that," know that most romance customers can account incidences of disrespect from sales clerks, ranging from unpleasant body language to snickering to comments such as, "You read this stuff?" before ringing up the purchases.

If your employees are treating romance customers with disrespect, you'll probably never know about it since most customers will never complain out of embarrassment—indeed, if the reader had misgivings about buying a book with a provocative title or cover, a negative remark or facial expression from a clerk might reinforce those doubts, making her feel as if she's the guilty party, that she might have deserved the derision. Nothing could be further from the truth, but *in general*, women are more sensitive to the judgments of others. She probably won't complain, but she'll go elsewhere when she wants to buy another romance novel.

Keep in mind that if your employees are consciously or subconsciously showing contempt for romance customers, they might not even be aware of their behavior, or be aware that what they're doing is wrong. These days, it has become socially acceptable to poke fun of stereotypes, from telling lawyer jokes to pigeonholing computer geeks. If a person's occupation or interests fall into one of these universally maligned themes, society begins to see those people as "fair game." Antagonists might rationalize that they're not really being rude and that in fact, their reaction is *expected*. After all, it's all in fun, right?

Wrong. At least that's the message you need to convey to all of your employees—it's never okay to show disrespect for a customer's purchases. Specifically:

- Watch your body language—eye-rolling and scoffing can speak volumes.
- Watch your vocabulary—referring to romance novels as "those books" and other derisive terms is not acceptable.
- Watch the store layout—if the romance section is poorly kept or in the back of the store, it sends a subliminal message to romance customers.

(continued)

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- Watch your display area—if signs distinguishing the genre sections in your store do not contain the word “novels” after “Mystery,” “Science-Fiction,” et cetera, the word “novels” should not appear after “Romance.”
- Watch your “checkout chat”—offering add-ons like “plain” book coverings and holders to obscure the cover of a romance novel sends a censoring message to the customer.

Take time to educate your employees about the importance of the romance genre to the book industry and to your store’s bottom line, and you’ll never have to worry about unintentionally turning away those valuable romance customers! ~**SBond**