

Keep the Stores, but Change the Customer

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There is little question that how and where we shop has changed in recent years. The rapid growth of big box, discount stores and online shopping has eliminated the need for many traditional retail outlets. While we may sympathize with “no longer competitive” merchants, it is unlikely that many of us would suggest a return to neighborhood butcher shops and door-to-door milk delivery. We might politely chuckle when the local independent grocer states that if he could only change the customers so they would shop like they used to, he would still be successful. We might politely chuckle, but likely would not consider the idea of changing customers very realistic. A much more realistic evaluation would suggest that surviving operators recognize changes in customer needs and adapt to them with alternate shopping opportunities. Successful merchants don’t try to change the customer, they redesign the store. Retail history is full of “former” merchants who, fantasizing about how good things were, failed as their personally comfortable, known business offerings no longer satisfied customer needs.

What does the merchandizing change story have to do with education? Are there any parallels between merchandising and education? Even though their activities are quite different, both educators and merchants face the same demographic, mobility, social and family structural changes in the populations that they serve. The unsuccessful merchant’s

complaint that poor results were caused by the customers sounds very similar to the often-heard conclusion from educators that poor academic results are caused by the students. We offer the polite chuckle to the merchant who says give me customers that will spend how I want them to and I will prosper. How should we react to the educators who say give us students who are easy to educate and we will do well?

What if we altered the headline to read ***KEEP THE SCHOOLS, BUT CHANGE THE STUDENTS?*** A close look at the various educational reform programs might be instructive. If we were to make a count, it is likely that the number of educational initiatives that attempt to change the student far outnumber those that propose changing the school. Beginning at an early age, we have initiated programs that strive to change students who need extra support to survive in the traditional school. There are a wide variety of pre-school, during school and after-school supplemental programs designed to change the student. These programs are funded by a mix of local, state and federal funds, both public and private. Another very popular set of initiatives works to change instruction by modifying course content, instructional order, completion requirements or achievement standards. While motives for these initiatives are well meant and most programs well accepted, their impact on academic results is quite mixed. National academic achievement results do show progress, but the difference in

achievement between the easy and the hard to educate remains quite large.

Attempts to change the schools are far less common. Most students are taught in an assigned room by an assigned teacher for an assigned period of time. The fact that this basic arrangement has not changed for many generations is well discussed. Many students who are now in school who would not have attended many years ago, are expected to conform to the traditional structure. Students are separated by age rather than educational needs. One-third of the year is given to holidays and vacations. Use of on-line information and para-professionals, common in most other service venues, is accepted slowly.

One can ponder about the reasons that changing the students is more attractive than changing the schools, but two separate questions are suggested that may be more important in the long run. How should we structure school to fit the needs of current students and will the ultimate outcome for the educator who does not change and blames poor results on the students be similar to the merchant who loses business and blames it on the customers? Will education history be full of “former” educators who, fantasizing about how good things used to be, tried to change the students and keep the school just as it has always been.

Do we hear a polite chuckle?

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