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A Brief History of the Mall Kiosk

This shopping season, take time to sympathize with the owners and employees of mall kiosks—even the rabidly Republican ones.

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"Excuse me, sir. How old is your daughter? She's adorable." The speaker, a young woman wearing blacks and grays and no perfume, has to raise her voice by the end, as her target scurries away.

Employees at mall kiosks find themselves in a tough spot, and this woman is no exception. According to her kiosk's gaudy banners and signs, it can help kids "get exposed to Agents, Managers, Casting Directors, & Music Producers." The adorable can even sign up for a free evaluation, after which, of course, the talent agency will start pushing its "marketing tools." But the kiosk employees need only to collect contact info, and this means they can be generous with their praise.

Let's set aside any questions about this particular arrangement—shoppers hate kiosks of all stripes, walking in parabola-like arcs to avoid them. In the case of this woman, parents reach down and grab their kids' hands after passing, an involuntary defense mechanism. And this would be a conventional reaction to mall kiosks. Watch for 10 minutes, though, and your sympathies will shift. This has to be the worst job in the world.

I did watch for 10 minutes, and in that time the woman and her five co-workers approached 56 people, making it past "Excuse me" with seven, luring three to the booth, and getting the contact info of two. Worse than this constant rejection, I think, is the constant intrusion. Kiosk employees must insert themselves into other people's lives forcefully and repeatedly, and it wears on them more than it wears on you. Over the course of an eight-hour shift (longer during the mall's busiest seasons), they begin to resemble light bulbs powered by an overworked grid—perky and inviting to a nearby customer, then tired, slumped, wanting to be anywhere but on their feet. On! Off! ... On!

It's been that way since the beginning. Modern malls began appearing in the 1950s, but the first mall kiosk didn't open until 1976 at Boston's Faneuil Hall, and kiosks didn't become widespread until the early 1980s. (Recall that there are no kiosks in the mall in George Romero's 1978 *Dawn of the Dead*, but a few crop up in Zach Snyder's 2004 remake.)

Since then, kiosks have grown steadily. They now account for $12 billion of malls' total sales, which fell to $2.3 trillion in 2008, and some malls have started kiosk waitlists to accommodate the current number of unemployed entrepreneurs. Even nationwide brands—notably Tupperware and Dell—have dabbled in kiosks. The Lids chain now boasts 800 locations (and approximately as many variations on the Yankees cap), but it started as a single cart.

While kiosks are increasingly run by national chains, many remain independently owned—a kind of postmodern mom-and-pop store. There are a few bad apples, as in this case of rogue teeth whiteners, but, since it's far easier to plop down a kiosk than open a store, they generally reflect the market's own appetites and do so in real time. Yet kiosks rarely get the respect we bestow on drugstores and soda shops, even as their independent status creates a range of unique challenges. In fact, I'd submit that kiosk owners deserve as much sympathy as their employees.

But sympathy can be hard to come by. After receiving several angry letters, management at a North Carolina mall decided that the inventory at the "Free Market Warrior" kiosk, which included anti-Obama or pro-Confederacy paraphernalia, depending on whom you ask, wasn't "neutral" enough. It turned out that the mall chain's owner was an Obama donor, but the lesson of the Free Market Warrior is less one of ideological strife than of the precarious existences of all kiosk owners. Malls use kiosks to cash in on unused space, charge their highest rent per square foot, and even assess "overages," or a percentage on profits after a certain point, three times higher than those on regular stores—and all, in most cases, on month-to-month leases that limit the leverage of kiosk owners. Whatever its motivation, the North Carolina mall simply had to opt not to renew the Free Market Warrior's lease, leaving its owner with nowhere to turn, except the op-ed echo chamber and the tea-party circuit.

It's easy to imagine this scenario recurring—and, in at least one recent case, it has, with a Tennessee mall terminating the offending lease in 24 hours—but kiosk discrimination can take many shapes. Take ZeroGravity, a kiosk located in the same mall as our talent agency and owned by a young man from India (where kiosks are also a booming business). Three years ago, he rented the same location and sold premium poker chips, but now he, along with his girlfriend, demos remote-control helicopters and other trendy toys. Both times, the man’s cousin tipped him off to a potential product and then served as his wholesaler. But if kiosks provide an easy entry into the American economy, their temporary nature and international flavor—industry estimates suggest that recent immigrant families operate as many as 25 percent of all kiosks—can lead to disproportionately high social tensions, as when the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported in 2002 that FBI agents raided several mall jewelry kiosks looking for terrorist connections.

For all their free-market mojo, kiosks also face a surprising amount of regulation from the malls themselves. Here, it helps to remember that malls are very intentional spaces. When mall guru and all-round nice guy Victor Gruen insisted that his centers include art, he did so to draw eyes (and thus legs) to the second floor. (The fact that mall management put the Free Market Warrior next to Bass Pro Shops, which surely boosted its sales and their overage, significantly undercuts any plausible deniability on their part.)

Like many broad initiatives, this often breaks down at the local level. Rudolph & Me, a small pushcart that sits just past ZeroGravity and specializes in Christmas kitsch, is dwarfed by

Adriana Lima's larger-than-life cleavage, courtesy of a Victoria's Secret window display. Still, malls strive to control every commercial variable, and this is especially true of kiosks. Malls strictly regulate the amount, type, even the height of kiosk advertising, and many anchors block kiosks entirely from appearing in front of their stores.

For the 2008 edition, its fourth, the *Shopping Center Development Handbook* changed titles. The Bible of mall developers now answers to *Retail Development Handbook* and promises to explain the "rehabs of failed malls," and this about-face indicates the trouble many malls are in. (While we're on the subject, you owe yourself a visit to www.deadmalls.com this holiday season.) For those planning to keep their malls—after all, it's easier to retitle a book than rehab a mall—the *Handbook* urges them to make sure their kiosks don't "appear to be separate stores." You don't have to read between the lines to see that, even as they succeed where many "separate stores" are failing, mall kiosks remain decidedly second-class citizens.

Which brings us back to their employees. While a few kiosks pay minimum wage, most employees told me they make $8 to $10 an hour through a mix of salary and commission. Most work full-time. Most lack health insurance. The turnover is shockingly high, even given many kiosks' seasonal nature.

If you visit a mall like the one described here—and you will, since, for better or worse, they're all the same, right down to the enormous Santa-ready sleigh, twice the size of the brand-new Toyota Tundra parked down the aisle—know that you, the customer, are protected. More than anything else, malls regulate "hawking," or aggressive solicitation on the part of kiosk employees. The woman at that talent agency told me she "can't go past this third floor tile here, or we get seriously fined."

But also consider moving beyond fear and loathing and into empathy. And keep an eye out for socialists and/or the FBI.