By Sunday Holm

In a perfect world, the relationship between a yarn store's staff and the knitters who shop there is always warm and fuzzy. But any yarn lover who's dealt with a way-too-demanding customer or been dissed by stressed-out sales clerk knows that real life works out a little differently. I've been a knitter for more than twenty years and a worked and taught in a shop for ten of them. I loved my job, but had days when my customers drove me completely crazy. On the flip side, while most of the stores offered a great retail experience, there were a few where the service was less than stellar. My experiences (both good and bad) on both sides of the register have taught me that with a little understanding, good communication and a lot of honesty, the interactions between store and shopper needn't become a tangle. In an effort to soothe feelings and tempers here's my list of ten potentially combustible situations and how to diffuse them.

A Store's-Eye View

Knitters are generally nice people, as are the knitters manning your favorite LYS. But working in a yarn shop can be a very intensive service job, and nerves do get frazzled. During my years as a yarn shop clerk I encountered several situations that were particularly prickly, all of which can be smoothed over with a little patience and understanding from both parties***.***

Overhandling the merchandise. Knitting is above all a tactile experience and a faced with a shop full of beautiful colors and fibers, it can be downright impossible keep your hands to yourself. Shop staffers find the skeins they stock hard to resist as well, and encourage you to squeeze, fondle and caress the skeins that appeal to you—just please take care as you do so. Rub yarn on the inside of your wrist, not across your face (makeup, facial oil and sunscreen can soil the fibers) and please don't untwist hanks or unravel balls—it leaves the store with a big mess to straighten up and more often than not, a yarn that needs to be marked down or written off***.***

Asking the store to hold yarn or other merchandise, but never returning to purchase it. Most stores are perfectly happy to set a few skeins aside for you to pick up at a later date, but all too often, the customer fails to return to the shop to pick it up. Keeping merchandise behind the counter keeps it out of the hands of customers who have cash at the ready and can result in lost sales for a store. Here's a case where a little courtesy can go a long way. If you decide to buy the yarn elsewhere or simply change your mind about the project you had planned for it—give the shop a call and let them know. The staff will appreciate your courtesy, the yarn goes back to sales floor,

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and everybody's happy.

Seeking help with a project purchased elsewhere. Most shops will be perfectly willing to lend a helping hand, partly because they're nice that way and mainly because they're well aware that doing so just might encourage you to come back and buy from them the next time around. Retailers realize that you can purchase yarn just about anywhere these days, but you can't always get great service or a staffer patient or skilled enough to take you through the ins and outs of a complicated (or even not-so-complicated) pattern. Helping you out lets the staff show off just how special the store is. But that willingness has its limits. If you make a regular habit of bringing in patterns and yarns purchased online or at a different shop and then ask us spend hours teaching you how to use them, we're going to start feeling a little resentful. If you'd rather spend time than money in our shop that's fine, we enjoy your company. All we ask is that if you want an ongoing knitting tutor, either do at least some of your yarn buying with us or pay for one of our classes or private instruction. You'll get the support you need and we'll continue to operate a profitable business.

Requesting that the shop photocopy a particular pattern to avoid paying the full purchase price of a book. Sorry, but this is something shops just can't do—and with good reason. For starters, it's an infringement of copyright law. Pattern books, whether produced by a big-name publisher, yarn company or mom-and-pop press, are copyrighted and the only one who can give permission to copy the work is the copyright holder (usually the designer, the publisher or both). Copying a pattern from a book or leaflet and selling or giving it gratis to a customer is not only illegal, it also deprives designers and publishers of well-deserved proceeds from book sales. We understanding that laying out $30 for a book when you only like one or two patterns may be tough to reconcile, but consider the bigger picture. Creating a carefully edited and tested pattern book and making and photographing the sample garments showcased on its pages is both costly and time consuming. That $30 cover price helps keep designers, pattern writers and knitters employed and allowing them to continue creating new patterns for you to enjoy. If books aren't selling, because knitters are stealing patterns (and make no mistake, it's stealing) you can bet publishers will stop producing them.

Knitting "emergencies." It's a rare knitter who never gets tripped up by a particular stitch or technique and a rare shop owner who doesn't realize that lending a little friendly advice will keep customers coming back for more yarn. Any reputable shop will do its best to provide its customers with tech support, but please understand that staffers can't always drop everything to rip out your rows or fix dropped stitches. Besides, doing the work for you won't help you to solve the problem on your own the next time it crops up. If other customers aren't clamoring for attention we'll be happy to spend a few minutes to set your knitting straight—but if you require more time or more personalized attention, a private lesson or a class in a particular technique is a better option for both of us.

Customer Feedback

To keep a long line of loyal customers, pretty much all the average LYS needs (aside from a great selection of yarn) is a friendly staff, a modicum of encouragement, and willingness to problem solve. Like most knitters passionate about the craft, I'll gladly patronize any yarn store at least once, but there are a few issues that make me hesitate to come back.

Getting a less than warm welcome. Some stores make you feel right at home the minute you walk in the door; others not so much. Happening upon a store with standoffish staff or an established knitting circle in full swing can sometimes feel like walking into a party to which you weren't invited. Stores can ease the awkwardness by encouraging newcomers to pull up a chair and offering a friendly welcome and introductions all around.

Difficult displays. For the most part knitting customers don't care whether your stock is sorted by color, fiber or gauge, they just ask that it be organized in some recognizable way. Sure it can be fun to dig around in the bins looking for that great skein, but if we can't find what we're looking for we'll walk away frustrated and empty handed. Yarn that is organized and nicely presented makes it easier for customers to buy from you. On the other end of the spectrum, some stores set up shop so beautifully that the space looks more like a yarn museum than a retail store. Everything looks lovely, but we're afraid to touch, let alone buy.

Beautiful yarns with mystery prices. When there's no price tag in sight, the perfect yarn quickly becomes not so perfect. Some of us are shy about asking or simply don't want to spend the time seeking out a sales clerk to clue us in on the cost. Walking up to the register with an armful of yarn and discovering that it's going to cost $209 to knit a sweater is a surprise most of us can do without. Labeling every single skein isn't necessary, but a discrete sign with the yarn name and cost would save us both a lot of trouble—and likely sell more yarn.

Coming up short. Finding the perfect yarn in the perfect color only to discover the store doesn't have enough in stock for the project we want to make is incredibly frustrating. You can soften the blow by offering to order more for us or by calling around to others stores in the area to see if they can make up the difference. We'll be too impressed by your willingness to help out to jump ship to the other store and will no doubt be back for more. Oh and can we mention that we'd rather you stock deep in a few colors, rather than one bag of every shade?

Telling rather than showing. Most customers don't doubt that your staff knows how lovely that to-die-for merino or hand-dyed silk looks when knitted up, but we'd really rather see for ourselves. We know it's a big investment in time and money, but a single swatch (or better yet, a sample garment) can speak a thousand words, showing us how the finished knitted fabric will look and behave. Add in a note that gives the needle size and gauge for each sample (especially if it differs from that on the ball band) and we have everything we need to know to make an informed purchase.

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