

My name is Anna. I'm 28 years old with a degree in literature and a life story that is both completely ordinary and a bit unusual. I've worked for eight years in a supermarket. I started out there just to fund my studies and to have some financial independence. But when I couldn't find any work using my degree, I stayed on and became that stalwart of modern life, a checkout girl.

The till. Not a great conversationalist, unless you count the beeps it gives when you scan the produce. As a result of listening to that robotic noise I felt I was frankly becoming a little like a robot myself. The fleeting interaction with the customers was not enough to make me feel human. Happily though, contact with my colleagues did just that.

One day I decided to write about my working life and record the little incidents that fill the day of a checkout girl. Suddenly I was looking differently at the customers filing past my till. I was seeing the world of retail with new eyes and discovering that it was a lot more varied than I had thought. There are the easy customers and the more challenging ones. Rich ones, poor ones. Nervous customers, boastful customers. Customers who treat you as if you were invisible and customers who say hello. The ones who are always champing at the bit for the store to open, and the ones who always come just as the store is closing.

There are customers who flirt with you and customers who insult you. Who says nothing happens in the life of a cashier?

I wanted to share all the situations I encountered. I have put together here a few of my stories, the ones that affected me most. So it's time to take your trolley and come into the supermarket. Look the shutters are already going up!

Happy shopping!

*Welcome to the wonderful world of  
retail – and your dream job*

Congratulations! You've finally managed to get an interview and actually been hired. Welcome to the retail family. You are now a checkout girl . . . sorry, checkout *operator*. That feels much more important doesn't it?

The interview only lasted a couple of minutes, long enough for you to repeat what's already on your CV and give them your bank details. No IQ tests? Or a bit of mental arithmetic? Come off it – you'll be suggesting they analyse your handwriting next. You're going to work on the till, you know, not being called to the Bar.

It's only your first day – but you still have to prove you're worth. So let's get cracking, time for training. Don't worry though – an 'old hand' will take you under her wing for at least, I don't know, a quarter of an hour? A morning if you're lucky. Or two days if your manager is nice. There are some nice managers, I promise. It's just the luck of the draw.

Let's start with a tour of the store. It won't take long (and besides there are other things to be getting on with). There's only the cloakroom, the staff room, the waste disposal area with the bins where all the produce that's passed its sell-by date ends up – you'll find you spend a lot of time here – the Cash Office where you'll be given your float and . . . well, that's it.

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Now you know enough about the store to get down to work. You'll have plenty of time to explore your new work place further during your breaks. It will make them more fun.

The first time you sit behind the till in your wonderful Chanel or Dior uniform, or your hideous overall (depending on the store and the kind of customers they want to attract) with your float at the ready (the equivalent of several days' salary no less) you are bound to feel a bit intimidated. Take a deep breath. That feeling will pass.

Right, you've found your till, got your float and settled in. You're really concentrating and really motivated. The 'old hand' is beside you and you're all ears. You're ready to work. Not a moment too soon.

The main things to remember are: scan the items (with a quick glance to check that the price looks right), add up the total, inform the customer, ask for a loyalty card, take the money, give the customer their change, ask for ID if they're purchasing alcohol and give them the receipt. All with a nice sincere smile. Of course. And then "Thank-you-have-a-nice-day" and on to the next customer. Shall I go through it again?

To begin with it might seem that you have to work fast, too fast – especially if you start on a busy day. But it'll soon become automatic and you won't pay too much attention to what you're doing. Within a month it will be as if you and your till are one.

Time has flown by and the 'old hand' is already giving you less and less advice. It's all sinking in. You're becoming expert at scanning items and giving change. Well done! It's really not that complicated – you just need to know what to

do when and the rest comes of its own accord.

Right, now the 'old hand' is leaving you to manage on your own. You'll be able to scan your first items independently. Hurrah! What a treat that will be.

Actually, apart from the bee..ee..p of the scanner, it's not very exciting . . . fortunately there's lots of interaction with customers (but be patient, more on that later).

Oh yes, I almost forgot. There's a part that's not that easy but strangely, it's quite interesting. You have to learn all the code numbers by heart for items that are sold by the unit: lemons, green salad, thyme, artichokes, etc. Don't panic. There aren't that many and if you forget there is a prompt sheet on the till. And you can always ask your colleagues, Isabelle, Nadine, Marie, Nicole, who are never far away. Best not forget their names – not easy when you have about a hundred colleagues.

Your first day is almost over. The last customers are leaving and the store is closing. So what are your first impressions? Actually, it's quite a fun job. You scan lots of items (and discover things you didn't know how to use or even existed), you chat with people, you have pleasant colleagues, you listen to music all day and it's nice and warm.

A dream job. Well, almost. You have to come back and do it all again tomorrow. And the day after. And the day after that. And, as time goes by, getting up in the morning to go to your dream job won't be quite so appealing.

Believe me.

## *The Top 3 Questions Asked at the Till*

Pay attention please. This store's exclusive welcome gift to you is a set of the top three customer questions:

'Where are the toilets?'

'Don't you have any bags?'

'Are you open?'

Out of context they're not so bad. But wait until you're behind your till. By the end of the day these questions will make you want to commit an act of violence (or, at the very least have a good scream). Judge for yourself.

*The most urgent question: 'Where are the toilets?'*

*Customer* (rushing up and usually quite flustered)

'Where are the toilets?'

*Checkout girl* (obliged to interrupt her conversation with another customer)

'Hello!'

The customer does not reply.

*Checkout girl* (sighing but only inwardly)

'Over there.'

And she points at the big glossy sign saying 'Toilets' hanging just opposite the tills. The customer rushes off. No 'thank you' or 'goodbye' or even 'damn it'. Takes too long. When you've got to go . . .

*The most aggressive question: 'Don't you have any bags?'*

One of this millennium's greatest revolutions is the disappearance of the complimentary plastic bags offered to customers by supermarkets. Some people find this very irritating especially the first time they come across it. They see it as a money making scam. Their reasoning is as follows: 'If the store doesn't provide free bags anymore, they can sell them to customers and boost their profits.' That thought had occurred to me too. But I also have the urge to say to my customers, 'Think about the future and all the beautiful countryside there will be without plastic. Isn't the sea a nicer place without bags floating in it?'

Now the disappearance of plastic bags is pretty much accepted. You no longer see irritated customers abandoning their overflowing trolleys at the till. Yes, that did used to happen. But you might still be lucky enough to experience the following:

*Checkout girl* (who has scanned the customer's three items)

'£2.56 please.'

The customer pays by cheque (yes, really – he doesn't have any cash you see).

*Customer* (who is looking about at the end of the conveyor belt for bags for his pre-packaged tomatoes, his pre-packaged salad and his pre-packaged apples)

‘Don’t you have any bags?’

*Checkout girl* (for the thirtieth time in less than two hours)

‘Supermarkets don’t provide plastic bags any more. There are boxes in the storeroom or we have recyclable bags for 10p, which can be exchanged when they wear out.’

*Customer* (furious, his eyes almost popping out of his head)

‘Couldn’t you have told me before I paid?’

*Checkout girl* (sighing deeply but again only inwardly)

‘Sorry, but we haven’t provided bags for several months now.’ Smiling at the customer ‘Why don’t you just carry your shopping as it is? Everything is already wrapped in plastic.’

Even more furious, the customer takes his apples and his salad . . . and departs minus his tomatoes. After all, he only has two hands.

*The most annoying question: “Are you open?”*

You’re aiming to be the best, most polite, and friendliest checkout girl? Ok, that’s your right and it’s very admirable (although don’t forget how little you’re paid). But promise me that you will never let anyone address you as if you were your till. You are a human being not a machine that beeps.

It's not only customers who have rights. Here are a few suggestions as to how to deal with confused customers:

*Customer*

'Are you open?'

*The polite checkout girl*

'I'm not but my till is'.

*The sarcastic checkout girl*

'Beeeeeep!'

*If the customer is really good-looking*

'Try me and see . . .'

*The checkout girl with her best smile*

'Are you?'

I can't guarantee what reaction you'll get to any of the above.

Over time, you'll find that some customers vary the question:

'Are you closed?'

'Is she open?'

'Are you available?'

'Can I come over to you?'

It's up to you how you interpret them . . .

## *Cashing Up: the Search for the Missing Coin*

It is 9.05 p.m. That was your first real day. You have just served your last and 289th customer. You've been behind the till for eight hours with two fifteen minute breaks. You're tired. You dream of one thing – going to bed and sleeping until 6 a.m. tomorrow.

'Oi, wake up! The day isn't over yet!'

You still have to clean your work station (you weren't naïve enough to think that a cleaner was going to do it for you were you?) and cash up (you didn't have the cheek to think that you were being paid to do nothing did you?). Count yourself lucky, at least here you don't have to clean the aisles.

Right, hurry up, over to the Cash Office with your cash box!

Sit down over there with your colleagues and find a pen and paper. Don't yawn, you haven't finished work yet! Start by counting your coins, then your notes and finally your coin rolls. I say 'your' but obviously they're not really yours. Oh actually, count them in whatever order you please – you still have the right to make that choice. Don't let yourself be distracted by the chatter, the doors opening and closing and the rattling of coins. Concentrate or you'll regret it when you find yourself with the joy of recounting.

Not enough light? Don't complain, think of it as a relaxing soft light after the blinding glare of the store.

*15 minutes later*

Ok, you have scrupulously noted how many 1, 2, 5, 10, 20 and 50 pence pieces and 1 and 2 pound coins you have. And the number of 5, 10, 20 and 50 pound notes. And the number of coin rolls . . . Calm down, now. Yes, you have a small fortune in your hands. But don't think about that. Instead, think about your salary at the end of the month. That will bring you back down to reality again . . .

Add it all up and then subtract your till float (yes, the £150 in cash that was in your cash box at the start of the day).

'Right, 173 how much? 173?! Yes, that's you!'

'I have a name!'

'Yes I know but it's quicker this way. So, 173?'

'£3678.65!'

'Count again 173, you've made a mistake! I warned you. You weren't concentrating properly.'

'Am I way out? Or just a little? Under? Over?'

'Just count it again.'

*10 minutes later*

'£3678.15!'

'Ok. Before you go check that your cheques and discount vouchers are safely put away. We're not your skivvies you know.'

9.35 p.m. You take off your overall in the changing room. You only have five minutes to catch your bus. Good night and sweet dreams (full of *beeeeps*, hellos, goodbyes . . . perhaps not).

*“Hang on a Minute,  
I’m at the Checkout!”*

Ah, mobile telephones. What a marvellous invention. It’s just incredible all the things they can do: play music, show TV, send emails, follow the stock market ... Incidentally they also enable us to make calls when and where we want. But that’s not all that mobile phones can do. Some can even make a man (or a woman) invisible – and it’s not only the most expensive models that can do it. The fact that checkout girls are pretty invisible anyway, helps with this trick.

*Customer* (on the phone, talking loudly as if he were on his own at home)

‘But I’m already at the till! Couldn’t you have told me earlier that you wanted bananas?’

*Checkout girl* (very loudly to remind him that he is at the till and not at home)

‘Hello!’

*Customer* (apparently he still thinks he’s at home)

‘Go out tonight? Are you feeling better then?’

*Checkout girl* (who has worked really fast so that he soon will be at home )

‘£13.50 please.’

*Customer* (collecting his shopping with one hand, and not moving fast at all)

‘I’m sure it’s a stomach bug. I hope you haven’t given it to me. I don’t want to spend all night on the loo.’

*Checkout girl* (getting up from her chair, clearing her throat and speaking very loudly indeed)

‘£13.50 please!’

*Customer* (with a quick glance at the checkout girl but continuing calmly to collect his shopping)

‘. . . you’re the one who never listens to me. You should wash your hands every time you go out.’

*Checkout girl* (clenching her fists and speaking really, really loudly)

‘Do you have a loyalty card?’

*Customer* (inserting his bank card into the machine without glancing up)

‘. . . I get it, I’m not deaf. You’re so grumpy when you’re ill.’

The customer grabs the receipt from the checkout girl’s hand as if she were a ticket machine.

*Customer* (moving away with his shopping, still on the phone and still talking loudly)

‘. . . It’s a good thing everyone’s not like you.’

*Checkout girl* (really loudly, but only in her head)

‘And it’s a good thing everyone’s not like you. What an idiot!’

And she decides not to bother with a goodbye. Every small victory counts.

Don’t feel sorry for yourself. You’ve just had an unforgettable experience – for a few minutes you have been completely invisible. And look on the bright side; you might get to experience the same thing again but with a subtle difference.

*Customer* (on the phone)

‘Blah blah blah . . .’

*Checkout girl*

‘Hello!’

*Customer* (looking at the checkout girl)

‘Hello.’ And eyes immediately focusing elsewhere. ‘So, as I was saying . . . blah blah blah . . .’

I’m not exaggerating.

But there really is a reason to look on the bright side. It’s not impossible that you will come across this rare specimen.

*Customer* (on the phone)

‘I’ll call you back, I’m at the till.’

The customer hangs up and puts his phone away.

*Checkout girl* (with a really big, sincere smile)

‘Hello!’

*Customer* (returning her smile)  
'Hello!'

Isn't life great? Well yes, but don't get carried away. That kind of customer is very, very, very rare. People who have met them still talk about it . . .

Now, if you are particularly sensitive about appearing invisible and this is your second year behind the till (surely you're used to it by now?! ) you might want to do this instead:

*Customer* (on the phone)  
'Blah blah blah . . .'

*Checkout girl* (scanning products quickly while . . . talking on her hands-free kit)  
'Blah blah blah . . .'

*Customer* (looking at the checkout girl)  
'Don't you have any bags?'

*Checkout girl* (without glancing at the customer)  
'No.' And immediately 'As I was saying, blah blah blah . . .'

In your dreams – no, not even in your dreams. A checkout girl must always act like a checkout girl. And a checkout girl does not use the phone at work! At least not until computers have replaced her entirely. Some customers appear to think that's happened already.