

Written by Oliver Kellegher  
Tuesday, 23 August 2011 11:15

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REGULARLY we get updates from various agencies that promote employment and business in Ireland.

We seem to go out of our way to report on the establishment of ten or twelve jobs created in some business sector.

These reports often insinuate that we have an upturn in the Irish economy when in fact it may be to the detriment of existing jobs in the immediate area.

Over the past 10 years almost every multi national retailer has either set up business or extended their operations in Ireland.

Last week it was reported that another UK based discount operator was opening five stores in Ireland with the creation of 180 jobs. Where are all the customers in Ireland who have resources to keep all those operators and the existing Irish retailers in business?

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I was reliably told last year that judging by Manchester, which has the same population as Ireland, we need a population of 17 million people in Ireland to justify business for the amount of retail outlets we already have.

Many family owned businesses in Ireland used to make up a large population of our retail outlets. These were people who perfected the art of good customer relationships, gave credit and delivered the goods to the door.

Many of these types of operators have been squeezed out by the big timer operators, who may not give the same service to their customers but may woo them with cheap prices.

On a weekly basis we get reports from various consumer organisations and individuals who keep us updated with their price checks.

Their purpose in life is often finding out who sells the cheapest products. They never seem to advise us on who gave the best service, who said hello to you when you enter their store, who packed your goods in bags or carried them to your car.

That type of service in modern Ireland is not worth reporting, yet that type of service is what brings people back.

My first real experience of good customer service I learned in the University of Cloone. Cloone is a small village in Leitrim where Pat Quinn, the founder of Quinsworth, was born. My first job after leaving school was in the retail trade in Quinsworth with Pat Quinn.

If you didn't learn the basics of retailing fast you probably wouldn't stick the pace. It was drummed into us everyday and it eventually became a way of life.

You were made realise that the customers were the people who kept us in business and without them you were history.

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While prices were and are important, customer service and attitude was more important. Over the years Irish attitudes may have changed, some for the better, others for the worse.

A few years back I visited Macy's Store in New York, a huge store with thousands of staff. Judging by the signage throughout the store, customer service was paramount.

Staff were well trained to greet people, to help advise people and to make a sale. Their business approach makes Macy's one of the most successful retail companies in the world. Nobody has ever suggested that they are the cheapest retailer.

They sell the best products that people want at competitive prices, which to all of us is value for money when everything is taken into account.

So we have more multi national retailers creating jobs throughout Ireland. Creating 100 here or 50 jobs somewhere else. Are these real jobs or are they jobs that will be lost in some other retail outlet because of too much competition?

More than likely the retailer who loses out are those who are located in town centres where excessive charges by local authorities makes it impossible to compete with retail parks that may afford customers easy access and free parking.

I spoke recently with one retailer in a town in the west who told me the rates demanded for his premises for 2011 is greater than the yearly rental value of his property.

It may be past time people who set these charges for unrealistic rates, water charges and levies start to live in the real world.

In the good times, if we could ever class them as good times, government run agencies seemed

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to take the approach that the well would never run dry and they could screw people forever.

Justice, fairness and value for money never seemed to have been an issue. Their ways of doing business and their methods of charging was never questioned because there was no one in authority to fight for customers rights.

We may have lost the run of ourselves in many walks of life especially where money and charges are involved, but new jobs created in some Irish businesses may be at the expense of jobs that were created one or two decades ago.

This is life. We live in a democratic free world with everyone is given the opportunities to do their own thing even though it may cost you dearly to do your own thing after you have adhered to every demand and obstacle that has become part of Irish business life.