Interview Transcripts

# Interview with Monique (Pseudonym)

INTERVIEWER: Today is April 1, 2015, and it is 10:15 a.m., Mountain Time. I'm talking with Monique. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me. I'm going to ask you a number of questions about your experience in retail. If there's any question you don't know the answer to or would prefer not to answer, that's fine. Just tell me that and we can skip to the next question. First, can you just tell me a little about the line of business that your company was in? What goods or services did they offer to customers? What was the basic nature of the company you worked for?

MONIQUE: It's a clothing and accessory retail store, catered mostly towards young teenagers, more specifically girls, but there was a men's line there.

INTERVIEWER: So primarily female. When you say young teenagers you are talking...?

MONIQUE: Between the ages of, like, thirteen—maybe actually you could go down to eleven—up through probably about eighteen.

INTERVIEWER: When did you work for this employer?

MONIQUE: I worked . . .

INTERVIEWER: Roughly.

MONIQUE: 2009 to 2012.

INTERVIEWER: So for about four, three to four years.

MONIQUE: Three years. It was just shy of three years.

INTERVIEWER: Based on your knowledge, and I don't need the exact number, how large was your employer in terms the number of people that worked at the location you worked at?

MONIQUE: On average, I think there were about eight of us.

INTERVIEWER: Eight working at any given time?

MONIQUE: Eight total.

INTERVIEWER: Total staff members.

MONIQUE: Total staff members. There were usually . . . I mean, there always had to be two people in the store at all times, so it was usually like that. Except during the holiday season there were usually five or six of us.

INTERVIEWER: And then did your employer have only one location, or were they located nationwide? What type of . . .

MONIQUE: It's nationwide. I think it might even be a global company. I'm not sure. But there was only one in the city.

INTERVIEWER: Would you classify them as a large chain?

MONIQUE: Yes. Very large.

INTERVIEWER: What was your specific role with the company? What kind of work did you do, and what were your responsibilities?

MONIQUE: Well, when I started out, I was basically the clean-up crew. I went around and picked things up, refolded the clothes that got messed up, put stuff away, and like closed the shop, or helped close the shop. And then by the time I left I was . . . the position is called the "cash-wrap specialist"—it's basically the head cashier. I trained the new people, the cashiers, and I would . . . I had a little bit of, like, money. . . . Obviously I had money responsibilities, but also like I would close out the till rather than the managers closing out the till.

INTERVIEWER: What, if any, major policies did your company have relating to customer service that were publicized widely? Did they have any policies, for example Wal-Mart has the big sign "100% satisfaction guaranteed" right outside all their stores. Other people say, very publicly, "The customer is always right." Did your business have any sort of very public customer service policy that they advertised?

MONIQUE: Not that I can think of.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

MONIQUE: I mean, like, the employees had specific rules that they had to do, but there wasn't a big thing like that.

INTERVIEWER: So their advertising wasn't based on customer service, to the best of your knowledge?

MONIQUE: Not that I can think of, no.

INTERVIEWER: Internally as employees, did they have any policies on customer service? In your own words, what were the official policies, regardless of any practice? What were the official guidelines in terms of customer service policies you can recall, if there were any?

MONIQUE: It was kind of like a fine line between just letting the customer roam around the store and pick out things they want, and almost being like the employees that work on commission, where you like push them to buy everything.

INTERVIEWER: Did you, in fact, work on commission?

MONIQUE: No. I didn't work on commission. And we were right next to a store that people worked on commission, and people would come into our store because we didn't work on commission. They could tell that there was a little bit of that push. "Hey, if you get this bracelet, it really completes the outfit," or you know, "This is on sale if you buy two," or whatever. But I had multiple people tell me that, "It's nice that you don't work on commission. You're not pushing me to buy everything in the store." But, I mean, there was a little bit of that.

INTERVIEWER: Any other customer service policies? For example, were there any policies on what to do if a customer was upset or had a complaint?

MONIQUE: Not really. I mean, it was like most people who would come in upset or whatever would be like, "Hey, I wore this once and it ripped. Can I exchange it?" And we'd be like, "Oh, yeah. Of course. We can exchange it no problem."

INTERVIEWER: And that was the official policy?

MONIQUE: Yes. That was the official policy. And there was, like, if they bought something and it went on sale the next day, they could come in and get back the difference in that sale price. I think that was actually within a two-week timeframe that people had. But they could always return things, no matter . . . It was just like if they didn't have a receipt we could only give back the sale it was going for right now.

INTERVIEWER: In your opinion, did your employer's official policies on customer service align with their actual practice in customer service in general? Both in terms of what they expected of you, and also in terms of what you saw your supervisors do?

MONIQUE: Oh yeah. Definitely. They were very good at practicing what they preach.

INTERVIEWER: Can you give me any specific examples of times you saw that happen?

MONIQUE: It was always very much a . . . I mean, there's a lot of the idea of "save the sale." If people want to come in and return things you can always go, "Oh yeah. Definitely. We'll return it, no problem, but you know you could always use that to exchange. We have some really great sales going on. What can I do to help you find something that works better?" type of a thing. Does that answer the question?

INTERVIEWER: So, in actuality, if somebody—I think you called it "push the sale"—you did see if somebody came back, people would try to do that.

MONIQUE: Yeah. It was always definitely you wanted to save the loss because, I mean, at the end of the day you wanted to have more actual sales than returns. So it was definitely a try to turn it around and try to get them to just exchange something—like if it was the wrong size—or buy something completely different with the refund that they got.

INTERVIEWER: Do you ever recall a time when a customer was unsatisfied or had some complaint where it . . .

MONIQUE: Where it escalated more?

INTERVIEWER: Where there was an escalation, or the customer did not get what they wanted, whatever that might have been.

MONIQUE: I don't remember any situation getting out of control. I mean, there definitely were times where people would be like, "No I just want a refund. It's fine." And you'd be like, "Okay, no problem." But I don't remember any time where I was scared, or anything like that.

INTERVIEWER: Did your employer have any other policies relating to other matters that conflicted with the customer service policies and your ability to give good customer service? Were there any policies that ever impacted your ability to give your customers the best experience?

MONIQUE: No, not really. I mean, it was always more stressful during the holiday rush just because there would be so many people in the store, but no, I don't remember anything contradicting itself.

INTERVIEWER: Was there ever a situation in which you specifically could not provide a customer with what you would describe as good service or were not able to meet a request of theirs either due to a policy or other situation?

MONIQUE: Yeah. It was only because they wanted a specific item—I don't remember if it was a shirt or a pair of jeans, or whatever—but we didn't have the size, so we were calling all of the other stores in our area, like to see if they had any sizes, and there was like one store that did have it, but for this particular customer I think it would have been like an hour and a half drive, one way, to get it. And they were like, "Oh, can you ship it to . . . Can you do store-to-store shipping?" and we were like, "No, we don't really do that because we don't have a system currently set up so that we could tell this is for a specific customer and this is for the rest of your stock." Like I said, I don't remember it escalating super high or being terrified or whatever.

INTERVIEWER: What was their reaction?

MONIQUE: They still came back. And we told them they could try looking online to see if anyone has it, but you'll have to pay shipping and handling. They were upset about that because can't we just ship it to the store. No, we still don't have a system currently that we can do that. I think they ended up just returning it, and they were like fine. But they came in the next week and were still, like, shopping.

INTERVIEWER: And you were being truthful that you could not ship it store to store?

MONIQUE: Yeah. That was a true thing.

INTERVIEWER: So even if a manager got involved, they could not have been able to do that?

MONIQUE: Yeah. I think the only way that you would have been able to do that was if it was a personal item. You didn't use company money, like whatever. I personally just mailed you a package, and I paid for shipping out of my own pocket type of thing.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember, by any chance, if there was a supervisor who saw that situation? How they responded? Did they comment at all on the way it was handled?

MONIQUE: I mean, that happened multiple times. Like, there were multiple really similar situations to that, and there were times where the supervisor was there. The first couple of times the supervisor was there because I didn't know what to do, so I was asking for help. But by the time I left, it was like, "Fine, if you're going to be screaming at me the whole time, yes I'll call my manager and they'll tell you the exact same thing." But usually . . .

INTERVIEWER: And is that what happened in each instance? The manager did tell them the same thing?

MONIQUE: Yeah. It was the exact same thing. There's really nothing we can do. It's not that we don't like you. There's nothing we can do.

INTERVIEWER: How did the managers ever comment to you on how you handled the situation? Anything between you that you remember?

MONIQUE: he only time that I only would get comments, that I remember anyway, was when it was a particularly difficult customer who would try to push, you know, "Give me a discount on the sale. Make it happen. Make it work," and they'd be like, "Good job on sticking to policy. There's nothing we can do. They were being a jerk."

INTERVIEWER: So generally a positive reinforcement for following policies. In general—just in terms of your own approach—how did you approach customer service at your own job? What was kind of your own philosophy, informed by the store's policies and your own beliefs? What was kind of your take on providing customer service?

MONIQUE: Always leave people better than you found them. No matter if they're in a great mood, still make them better than you found them.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have . . . Do you remember any specific examples of a time that might have happened?

MONIQUE: Sorry, it's been a while.

INTERVIEWER: It's kind of far back.

MONIQUE: Kind of far back. There was one, like, Back-to-School season where I could tell—it was like a mother and her daughter . . . and the daughter wanted a specific outfit, but the mom didn't think it was appropriate for her, so I had to see how to appease—I think that's the right word—how to appease both of them. So I, like, try to . . . . The daughter really wanted that specific outfit. Really wanted it. The mother was like, "That's not appropriate for school. I'm not buying that." I had to, thinking both don't lose the sale and don't make them both angry at me, it was a lot of, "Well, if you paired this bottom with this top and this top with this bottom, it's a little better." And they were things they had already been looking at, so it wasn't even like "buy more stuff." They had already been looking at it so, I mean, they were already frustrated at the point I got involved. Like, they were really frustrated with each other, and then they left in a pretty good mood.

INTERVIEWER: Almost done. You spoke to this a little bit earlier when you were talking about people trying to return things or get things shipped to them or whatnot. Were there ever any times that you had to navigate that difference between what customers expected—whether or not what they expected was reasonable—and what you could in fact do for them? Besides that story that you told earlier, can you think of other times where . . .

MONIQUE: Yeah. There were times when someone came in that was always like, "Give me"—and he came in repeatedly—"Give me a discount. Give me a discount. Give me a discount." And he did it in such a way that it was . . . He was like really cheerful and, "Oh, you can do it for me." Almost like a creepy, flirty type of way, and it was . . . It always happened when the manager would be, like, in the back working on closing out the books for the night, and I'd be like cleaning the floors and doing final touches. It always happened late at night or whatever. And there were many times where I told him, "If I give you a discount, I will be fired. I will lose my job." But I always, like, that was the final straw. I never led with that. "I can't," you know. "Oh, we have sales that change all the time, multiple times throughout the week. If you buy something now and it goes on sale later you can come in, and we'll give you the difference," blah blahblah. But there would be times where it would be like, Okay, you're making me uncomfortable, and we close in ten minutes, or whatever, and I'd be like, "Look. If I give you a discount I will be fired."

INTERVIEWER: How did he react in those instances?

MONIQUE: He'd usually laugh and be like, "Oh, I was teasing with you darling," and then leave. It was like . . . but I mean . . .

INTERVIEWER: When you mentioned you felt uncomfortable, can you tell me a little bit more about that? What about the situation led it to make you feel uncomfortable?

MONIQUE: I felt uncomfortable because it was, like, one-on-one. There was no one else in the store, it was late at night, the manager was in the back. Whenever that would happen, I would always try . . . How the store was set up, the manager's office, like the men's section was really close to the manager's door, which was right behind our cashiers. So I would try to steer him that way, so the manager could like see what was going on and everything like that. I would try and angle him in a way so that his back would be to the manager, and so I could look at the manager and give him a look like, "Come out here and help me," kind of a thing. But it never really got to a point where I was desperate, like, "Come out here and save me. Get this guy out of here," but I would be thinking strategies like that all of the time. How am I going to get you out of here?

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever have to verbalize you feelings? Did you ever actually say, "I feel uncomfortable," to the customer?

MONIQUE: Not to the customer. I mean, I would kind of joke around with it to my manager after they left. "Oh that guy was kind of creepy. It was getting to the point where I wanted you to come save me," but . . .

INTERVIEWER: My last question is just do you have any other thoughts on customer service in the retail industry and on your experiences at all? Do you have anything that would be helpful for people to know if they wanted to know more about retail and customer service?

MONIQUE: I always think that everyone should have a job where they're either in retail customer service, or food customer service because there's always like that one customer who is just a jerk. "Give me everything I want. Give it to me now." And you're like, "I am bound by these rules. Also, I've been on my feet for six hours. I'm tired. You're tired. Leave me alone. Don't be a jerk to me." But you, as the customer service person, still have to like plaster on that smile and be really nice and everything like that. I feel like people would be nicer if they had to work customer service jobs, in general.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me.

MONIQUE: No problem.