

Your business is their business

by Sabine Eiche

Richmond News, August 23, 2013, p.20

You have to dig deep into our English language to find the roots of the word business. It sprouted from the Anglo-Saxon “bisignis,” formed from the word “bisig,” meaning busy. Business is recorded as early as 1477 with a meaning that we still use – trade or occupation. But the word grew branches that spread widely. A century later, business also signified care and attention, anxiety and uneasiness, and – in the 1600s – trouble. Though that meaning is now obsolete, business and trouble still intertwine often enough.

Have you noticed that there have been developments in the retail business ranging from straightforward manipulation to invasion of privacy – in other words, spying? The manipulation is becoming increasingly obvious. In a local drugstore, before you can reach the post office counter, you have to run a tight obstacle course past awkwardly-placed shelves laden with snack food. In a local supermarket, you’re forced to manoeuvre around a mountain range of merchandise at the entrance, and when you’ve finished shopping you have to steer through a long, narrow channel that’s lined with candy bars to reach the self checkouts. Am I alone in not appreciating these stratagems?

However, such ploys are innocent in their transparency when compared to the tactics chosen by retailers to target you, personally. Store cards allow supermarkets, drug stores, department stores, etc., to keep tabs on what you buy. I used to think, naïvely, that the purpose of these cards was simply to allow you to benefit from special offers – perhaps retailers wish all customers were that ingenuous.

While store cards have been around for a long time, the methods for snooping on you have become ever more sophisticated, thanks to electronic technology. You can't even browse through a virtual store without someone finding out and trying to take advantage of it. A while ago I googled a clothing brand, wanting to lodge a complaint. The company guaranteed satisfaction, yet my complaint went unheeded. Instead, they added insult to injury, pursuing me with their ad on every webpage I visit. I am not amused.

And now there's predictive analytics, a whole new "science" permitting retailers to track your shopping habits, even your personal habits, in order to market to you as effectively as possible. Predictive analytics relies on the study of habit formation. An article published in the *New York Times* in February 2012 quoted the comment of Eric Siegel, founder and chairman of Predictive Analytics World: "We're living through a golden age of behavioral research. It's amazing how much we can figure out about how people think now." He might have added – without letting them know we're doing it.

There are shopping malls in the States with a system allowing them to track you through stores via your cell phone. As if that weren't bad enough, a new software used with security cameras analyzes and monitors your browsing habits and your "happiness levels." Furthermore, the marketing industry is studying the possibility of using facial recognition software to identify the sex and age of shoppers.

I believe I'm going to have to start wearing dark glasses and a false beard when I go shopping. How about you?