

Businesses turning customers into guests

By Hilary Stout, New York Times

The long line moves slowly. Clutching baskets of detergent, dental floss and such, the errand-running patrons of Walgreens assume their places with resignation, seeking only to pay and get out the door.

But when at last they reach the front, a cashier greets each one with a smile and the customer service salutation of our time:

“Following guest, please!”

It’s one of those head-scratchers of daily life that no one can explain. Somehow, at some point, the queued-up masses at drugstores, grocery checkouts, banks and retail establishments from Uniqlo to Staples became “guests” in the common service lexicon, instead of “customers.”

The linguistic turn has spawned eyebrow-raising and the occasional Twitter grumble or Internet rant over the years. One can easily imagine a “Seinfeld” discourse on the topic if the show were still in production.

We decided some reporting was in order get to the bottom of how this tic spread from the turndown service at a hotel to the pumps at a gas station.

Read the whole story