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The business of cheating customers

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SOME local businessmen have little ethics, especially the small ones. I encountered two of them last week. There could have been more, but I wasn't purposely looking for them. I'm sure that if I initiate a survey to find out instances where lack of ethics exist, I can get a national sampling quite easily.

Several national leaders have spoken about the lack of ethics among some businessmen, which means that the matter is a serious one and that it is no secret. The economic growth which the country has enjoyed over the years continues to push businessmen to embark on new ventures, but sometimes they overlook the larger picture when their vision is blurred by mega bucks.

Some of the businessmen with interests abroad have also come under fire from these leaders. The warnings have been issued by Cabinet Ministers right up to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. While profits and going global has been the call in recent years, this must not be at the expense of national image and reputation.

I hope that the businessmen I encountered would not venture beyond the country. If they do, then foreigners cannot be faulted if they conclude that hard-nosed Malaysian businessmen only go for quick profits, short-term tie-ups and care little for their customers.

The first one I encountered was a reputable tailor whose claim to fame included dressing up media personalities, some of whom believed that they are celebrities as well. The tailor has enjoyed much success ever since the link-up with these personalities.

I had accompanied an uncle to buy a coat and took him to this tailor in Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman. He preferred to buy a ready-made coat and there were numerous to choose from. After a little discount, my uncle chose a deep blue jacket.

He also took the tailor's advice on having his name embroidered on it. Encouraged by this show of good service, my uncle then decided to make a pair of pants as well. The bill came to almost RM1,000, a good deal for the tailor I thought.

A week later we went back to collect the coat and pants. But my uncle's name as promised by the tailor wasn't there and he insisted that there was no instruction to do so. The tailor had actually given a different coat but of the same size and cutting. The double-breasted jacket fitted snugly on my ex-army officer uncle.

He was happy and didn't want to argue with the tailor. We left the shop quickly but I had an uneasy feeling throughout the journey home. The uneasiness ended when my aunt greeted us at the door with an instruction from the tailor to return to the shop because he had managed to locate the coat with the name embroidered on it.

I dutifully went back to the tailor, returned the coat he gave and collected the right one. I told the tailor that this was not the way to do business. He must have misplaced the coat and found it after we left the shop. No one would buy a brand new coat with someone else's name on it.

It was for a simple business reason that the tailor called to alert us of the right coat. It wasn't done because it was the ethical thing to do. If he had been an ethical businessman, he would have searched his shop thoroughly. He couldn't have forgotten his earlier advice because the purchase was paid in advance in cash.

I told the tailor not to treat his customers lightly, especially if he wants them to keep coming back. I didn't tell him that my uncle could have bought the whole shop if he had wanted to!

Another proof of how unscrupulous small businessmen can be came via a kepala ikan lunch I had a few days ago. I was delighted when the stallowner told me that he served only kepala ikan tenggiri and ordered a small one, along with some other dishes.

When the food was served, it wasn't kepala ikan tenggiri! Instead, it was kepala ikan jenahak. The stall owner covered the fish head with brinjals but I knew a tenggiri when I saw one. A small argument later and a threat to check his licences resulted in a sheepish grin and an apology. I had raised my voice a bit and other customers were glancing our way, as if wondering why would a customer want to create so much fuss over fish head.

My thoughts then were simple. If the stall operator harboured any ambition to expand his business, he must first of all learn not to tell lies. Not telling the truth means he has no qualms about cheating customers as long as his bank account keeps growing.

Perhaps I should take the tailor for fish head lunch some day and see what happens when a liar meets a conman.

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