



SIMON LAFFIN INDEPENDENT RETAIL ADVISER AND NON-EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Online, price trumps customer service



Santander has quietly dropped my ISA interest rate to 0.1%. Irritated, I called them up to move it into another ISA account, which earns all of 2%. This required a great number of digits being

pressed in an automated queue, each followed by a truly awful dirge of pseudo-classical music. Finally, I talked to a nice lady who ignored my complaints about daylight robbery and agreed to transfer my account. There's just one problem: I must listen to a recorded message first.

Silence followed, then the dirge again, and then finally a lecture of boiler plate nonsense about ISAs. I lost interest after what seemed like a lifetime, and went back to my now urgent emails. It finished, and she came back on to say that I hadn't listened. "Yes, I had," I protested. No, she'd listened too and heard that I wasn't paying attention. There is clearly no end to the omniscience of a banker's call centre. Perhaps she heard me muttering about why everyone hates banks? "OK, I'll try again, but only if there's no music." I honestly did try to listen, but then the doorbell went.

It's the repairman for my domestic emergency. Great. I told him: "Go ahead and I'll join you when I've finished with this call." Several hours later, the message finished. "You weren't listening that time either," she said. "I heard you talking to someone at the door." She told me she'd give me one more try. I discovered the mute button on the phone and went on to talk to the repairman. The third message finished, and the blessed lady of the



John Lewis prides itself on its multichannel offer alongside quality in-store customer service

"SOME RETAILERS WILL TELL YOU THAT CUSTOMERS WILL PAY FOR IN-STORE SERVICE, BUT THE EVIDENCE IS THAT MORE AND MORE WON'T"

call centre waited till this moment of my triumph... to cut me off.

Like any good customer faced with poor service, I took my custom elsewhere. I went into a Virgin Money store. "Could I see someone?" I asked. "Yes, please take a seat, would you like a cup of tea, do use our wi-fi while you wait," I was encouraged. Happy, doing my now very urgent emails, time flew by as I waited. A man arrived, did the forms, thanked me and I was done. No lectures about the FSA or anything.

Here are two everyday tales of customer service, but subsequently I discovered that Santander lady did indeed upgrade me to 2%, after all. However, Virgin Money, for all its great service put my money into an account earning only 1.5%. And yet again, I ask myself, how much will people really pay for good customer service?

This is a big issue for multichannel retailers. Some, mainly those with actual stores, will tell you that customers will pay for in-store service, but the growing evidence is that more and more won't. As better product information and customer reviews appear online, the need for a knowledgeable assistant (assuming you can find one) is diminishing. Online, price is king.

When you do shop online, you always seem to have to tick a terms and conditions box. I suppose this is the digital equivalent of my Santander lecture. Who ever reads these paragraphs of legal waffle? Yet you are forced to sign that you have read and understood them. At least no-one has yet got software that spots that you didn't actually read them... Then tells you to read them properly this time.