

I Hate Department Stores Like Kmart, But I Keep Going Back

Shôn Ellerton, July 5, 2026

My love-hate relationship as to why so many department stores really piss me off.



Kmart, the infamous department store I so well remember as a kid growing up in the United States. Generally el cheapo and low quality products huddled together in one enormous mass under a flood of ultra-white fluorescent lights. And then those special *Blue Light Specials*, where zombie-like clans of regular mall-goers converge to the God of the Blue Light looking for bargains like Christmas trees selling for five bucks even though it's July. Or pink floral dinner plates that no one with any sense of decorum would deign to house in their kitchen cupboards.

Kmart kind of felt like the poorer and inferior version of Target. They shared many similarities, though.

This was back in the 80s and in the United States, and now, I wander through the same brightly-lit floorspace of a Kmart in Adelaide many years later. Target also happens to be in Australia, but it's a different beast being largely stocked with lots of cheap clothing being a sort of a cross between a TJ Maxx or Marshalls with a Kmart. For those who observe little details, the Target in the United States is spelled with capital letters while the one in Australia with lowercase except for the first letter. TARGET instead of Target. However, now there's rebranding with Target using ALL lowercase.

Seriously, how much can a company bullshit itself into thinking it's a great company by continuously changing its logo?

Now, to be fair, Kmart, at least in Australia, isn't a bad store for really cheap prices. Air fryers for twenty bucks. Microwaves for fifty. Mattress protectors,

quilts, and sheets are cheap here. And kitchenware and storage are simple and great. May not be the best quality, but it works.

I used to like Ikea for this stuff, but somehow or another, I often found their basic product line, especially in the kitchen department, to be quirky and unconventional in design. Seriously, all I wanted was a big baker's mixing bowl and ended up finding it in a Chinese supermarket. And oh, how the Chinese are so damned practical and smart!

When it comes to kitchen stuff, I am very conventional wanting only stuff which does what it's supposed to do. Preferably only high-quality conventional stuff. However, don't talk about my taste of music, films, and art. This is where I venture into the obscure and unconventional!

Kmart is one of these department stores that have adopted a way of customer service which really pisses me off.

Let's start with the returns department.

If you buy something and you're not satisfied with it, you can always return it later for a refund. That's what they say at the check out counter if you ask.

Thinking that I was onto a winner, I purchased an insert cutlery separator tray which was supposed to fit neatly into my kitchen drawer.

It was nice. Wooden and solid.

Damned thing was a few millimetres too wide. I'm certain I might have made it fit by taking the offending item to my workshop to be planed by a few millimetres, but hey, I'm not going to bother.

It was, I don't know, about twelve bucks or so? But I had the receipt! So I bundled the receipt and the tray in the back of my car, perchance, I might be in a convenient spot next to a Kmart.

I had that tray in the back of my car for weeks because, well, you know, I just wasn't around a nearby Kmart.

However, it so happened that I miraculously remembered I had the tray in the back of the car *and* I was near a Kmart, so I took the items inside to be refunded.

Great!

I waltzed into this Kmart in the middle of the week sometime around ten in the morning.

Looked fairly empty. Not many cashiers working. All the self-service machines were empty.

Freckled young lady at the front, all ebullient and affectionate with braces still on her teeth, told me that the returns area was up and to the right in the corner in a place marked, not surprisingly, Customer Service.

And here I was. Wanting customer service!

Edged my way in a funny sort of zig-zag way ploughing my journey through kitchenware, cushions and pillows, lighting, women's knickers and bras, and a small bookstall area, finally arriving at Customer Service.

I kid you not.

There were something like twenty people in front of me with *one* assistant at the counter working at a speed not much faster than tectonic plate activity in the Earth's mantle and crust.

I got to the rear end of the queue and *purposely* uttered the words, '*What the fuck?*', loudly enough that others could hear it.

It really is in bad form, I know! I admit it, ok? But there were no kids or elderly people there because that would be decidedly improper. But there's no excuse for me doing this.

Really. I'm not like that normally.

In frustration, I took a picture of the queue. Sent it to my wife attached with a note that I was going to bugger off and go another time.

My wife was very understanding and texted to me not to worry about it followed by a nice little emoticon with a smiling head. She knows full well that I, although patient with many things in life, am not patient with trivial instances like this.

The tray insert. Back it went in the boot of the car to probably emerge at a time when the receipt would have faded away to oblivion.

Now, another thing which many Target stores have adopted in Australia is the so-called new and improved way of positioning the cashier's area *in the middle of the entire store!*

In the sane and normal world of department stores and supermarkets, you have the cashiers at the front of the shop.

Doesn't that seem sensible?

You purchase all your gear. Get the receipt. Carefully put the receipt *inside* your wallet. Make sure you don't leave anything behind. Pick up your bags and leave the premises.

As it's by the entrance, there's only one place for you to go.

Outside!

But no. Kmart thought it would be progressive and cool to put the purchasing area with real-life action people and self-service machines *in the middle of the entire store!*

You purchase your goods and proceed with your shopping cart to the exit of the store and then, just before leaving, are asked to produce your receipt by, usually, some young and inexperienced person who has been given the misfortune of being allocated the task of being the proverbial '*receipt Nazi*'.

And I'm very kind to these unfortunate folk because *I know* they must get an awful lot of abuse by customers who have to trudge through their wallets or handbags to produce the receipt. However, I get enraged by the company that adopts this system and don't hesitate in writing unkind letters to overpaid CEOs who think that they can't be touched by the pariahs of the business world.

Oh! Did I say *pariahs*? I meant *customers*! Silly me!

So, here I am, producing a receipt to the young lad or ladette, sometimes saying something sarcastic and ever-so-British like, 'Oh, I didn't intend to steal this time' or something like that, much to the strong disapproval of my wife admonishing me that they won't understand this sort of humour.

However, saying that. A very cool interchange happened when I did just that in Ikea when the young lad, of either Indian or Pakistani in origin, responded in the

most English of fashion that next time he would tell me secretly where to go in the store to aid a shipment of smuggled goods leaving the store unnoticed.

I love this sort of humour and I remember his name and face to this day.

Seriously.

Who came up with the idea of positioning the cashier's desk in the middle of the store is a total cretin.

Now, to cap this piece off. Or should I say, a rant.

Those damned self-service machines!

There was a Kmart with *no* real people only served with these self-service checkout machines.

My wife and I wanted to buy some largish items. Kitchen bins, quilts, sheets, and a lot of stuff that is quite bulky in nature.

Kmart, in its most irksome way, thought it would be good idea to make it so that *everything* has to go on the scale to the left of the scanning machine.

I'm sure most of us have come across this in a supermarket.

You don't put the items in on the tray, and then you can't scan the next product because the scale hasn't registered what you bought.

And the manager or floor person is called upon and then he or she enters the holy code of the device that overrides the whole thing allowing you to scan anything you want without being dictated by what is weighed on the scales.

Some department stores allow this trust by default with the customer. Ikea and Bunnings, both very large department stores, allow customers to scan everything with a scanner gun leaving everything intact in their trolleys. Sure, there's an eye in the sky connected with an AI engine of sorts that has the ability to detect items that haven't been scanned, but it works reasonably well.

But try as you might. You are *not* going to be able to pile a 50 litre rubbish bin, three duvet covers, and an air fryer on one of those scales next to the scanner.

Totally dopey!

The manageress came around and kindly disabled the scale function and it worked flawlessly.

The key takeaway on all this is to stand your ground and make it blatantly obvious that some of these so-called modern features are irritating and, in many cases, just do not work.

Don't just accept that your opinion won't make any difference.

Trust me.

If enough people do, the company will respond accordingly.