

If airlines sold paint

Buying paint from a hardware store ...

Customer: Hi. How much is your paint?

Clerk: We have regular quality for \$12 a gallon and premium for \$18. How many gallons would you like?

Customer: Five gallons of regular quality, please.

Clerk: Great. That will be \$60 plus tax.

... From an airline

Customer: Hi, how much is your paint?

Clerk: Well, sir, that all depends.

Customer: Depends on what?

Clerk: Actually, a lot of things.

Customer: How about giving me an average price?

Clerk: Wow, that's too hard a question. The lowest price is \$9 a gallon, and we have 150 different prices up to \$200 a gallon.

Customer: What's the difference in the paint?

Clerk: Oh, there isn't any difference; it's all the same paint.

Customer: Well, then, I'd like some of that \$9 paint.

Clerk: Well, first I need to ask you a few questions. When do you intend to use it?

Customer: I want to paint tomorrow, on my day off.

Clerk: Sir, the paint for tomorrow is the \$200 paint.

Customer: What? When would I have to paint in order to get the \$9 version?

Clerk: That would be in three weeks, but you will also have to agree to start painting before Friday of that week and continue painting until at least Sunday.

Customer: You've got to be kidding!

Clerk: Sir, we don't kid around here. Of course, I'll have to check to see if we have any of that paint available before I can sell it to you.

Customer: What do you mean check to see if you can sell it to me? You

have shelves full of that stuff; I can see it right there.

Clerk: Just because you can see it doesn't mean that we have it. It may be the same paint, but we sell only a certain number of gallons on any given weekend. Oh, and by the way, the price just went to \$12.

Customer: You mean the price went up while we were talking!

Clerk: Yes, sir. You see, we change prices and rules thousands of times a day, and since you haven't actually walked out of the store with your paint yet, we just decided to change. Unless you want the same thing to happen again, I would suggest that you get on with your purchase. How many gallons do you want?

Customer: I don't know exactly. Maybe five gallons. Maybe I should buy six gallons just to make sure I have enough.

Clerk: Oh, no, sir, you can't do that. If you buy the paint and then don't use it, you will be liable for penalties and possible confiscation of the paint you already have.

Customer: What?

Clerk: That's right. We can sell you enough paint to do your kitchen, bathroom, hall and north bedroom, but if you stop painting before you do the bedroom, you will be in violation of our tariffs.

Customer: But what does it matter to you whether I use all the paint? I already paid you for it!

Clerk: Sir, there's no point in getting upset; that's just the way it is. We make plans based upon

the idea that you will use all the paint, and when you don't, it just causes us all sorts of problems.

Customer: This is crazy! I suppose something terrible will happen if I don't keep painting until after Saturday night!

Clerk: Yes, sir, it will.

Customer: Well, that does it! I'm going somewhere else to buy my paint.

Clerk: That won't do you any good, sir. We all have the same rules. Thanks for flying — I mean painting — with our airline.



ILLUSTRATION BY GODFREY CHAN

By Al Hess

INDUSTRY FUN

Agency owner is satirist, too

What made Al Hess write "If airlines sold paint," the airline-skewering piece above? "Every once in a while I have a satirical idea that I'll use to make a humorous point," he said.

"One night I was in bed and the whole absurdity of the way airlines operated just struck me. I think I actually got up and wrote it in the middle of the night."

Hess, owner of American International Travel/American Express in Bountiful, Utah, said he's used the piece in informal presenta-

tions with corporate clients to show them "why things are so weird in the travel business."

Still, he noted, "It's actually funnier to people in the business, who know just how strong airline rules are.

"If you're in the industry, you realize that the airlines do what they do for yield management purposes, but it creates some odd situations.

"When you put [these rules] in the context of another product, then you see how weird they really are."

Hess recently shared the piece with his fellow members of the agency group Travel Agency Management Services.

"It's not going to change anything, but at least we're going to laugh a little bit. "Sometimes humor makes a point that can't be made otherwise."

By Phyllis Fine

