



UP front

Murphy's Law applied to coffee: The owner walks into his shop, heads straight to the self-serve station, pulls the lever on the coffee dispenser, and....nothing. Empty.

Or he tips the half-and-half thermos, depresses the thumb tab, and a single white drop sheepishly falls into his cup, followed by...nothing.

The owner then says to his staff on duty, "We're a coffee shop. The bare-minimum expectation is that we have coffee."

One of the busy team-members hustles to swap a freshly brewed full urn for its spent sibling; the owner and the staff exchange chuckles; and everyone goes on with his or her day.

Why am I sharing this anecdote with you? Because it's personal for me, like most of the material in this column. I'm the owner in the story...of Cutters Point in Sandfly.

In addition to the we're-a-coffee-shop-so-we'd-better-have-coffee principle, I consistently repeat a mantra to each member of my team, beginning on his or her first day: "We're in the YES business." Sure, we're in the coffee business. And we sell pastries, breakfast foods, and snacks. We make frozen drinks; some are sinfully indulgent. But above all else, we are welcoming guests into our place. These guests have wants and needs. It's our responsibility to say "yes" to them, whatever the question, within measure of reason.

Which accounts for my dismay as I type this essay. Today, and for the past three, we've been in the YES-BUT business. Our espresso machine sprung an irreparable (we tried, so did our plumber, so did an electrician) leak in one of its feeder pipes. Fortunately, we have a backup, just in case, and the guys drove to Claxton and back to retrieve and install it in the broken one's place. But things are never as linear or easy or obvious as we'd like them to be. And the backup, which we paid handsomely to rebuild the last time it failed, doesn't work. Fortunately, we pursued a parallel path to the temporary-replacement strategy. On the day the main machine betrayed us, we ordered the essential parts and paid FedEx a premium to get them here fast. "Fast" was to be yesterday. As the afternoon hours passed, calls to FedEx yielded a troubling truth: Yes, the parts shipped, but no, they aren't coming today; but, don't worry, we'll refund you the expedited shipping charge.

In the meantime, "Yes...but...our espresso machine is down, so I'm happy to make you something like a vanilla latte with regular coffee if you're up for that..."

This morning, I drove my little home espresso machine to the shop. The team will muddle through as best they can. Perhaps FedEx will come through later this morning or early afternoon. If we're fortunate, our customers will not permanently alter their routines to exclude us. At minimum, I'm out a few thousand bucks.

Here's the unexpected punchline: I love it. Not the lost revenues nor the hassle for my staff. Not the diminished guest experience. I vehemently dislike all those things. It's the pure distillation of the theories of capitalism applied in real life that I appreciate. If we do things well and right, we are rewarded by the markets (our guests). If we slip up, it costs us. If we learn from our challenges (we're buying an extra machine identical to our primary one and keeping it on site and maintaining it as if it were in constant service, even though it's a significant investment), we recover quickly and completely (with a little luck). Nothing is guaranteed. Complacency is expensive. Competition is fierce. Pride of ownership is a real thing. So is embarrassment when the thing you own isn't performing as intended. Ultimately, it's on you. Economic theory distilled into a concoction made from water and ground roasted beans. And nobody can persuade me that our model (American capitalism...or, at least, what it has traditionally been) has a close runner-up.

My dad owned businesses. He worried about them a lot. He's a worrier, by nature. I've learned that worry isn't useful for me. I can control only two things: my effort level and my actions. Make decisions, implement them, evaluate results, correct course, repeat, again and again. Capitalism provides the privilege of a tangible feedback loop. When you get things right, you win.

Still, it's no fun when the machine is broken. Nobody is happy. Rather than worry, I cooked and savored a mid-afternoon leisurely lunch. Spaghetti with garlic, red pepper flakes, anchovies, parsley, and olive oil. Topped with a sprinkling of breadcrumbs. Pure, simple Italian comfort food. Good enough to make a man forget about everything else. I'll share the recipe with you in the next issue. It's easy...much easier than fixing an espresso machine that's on the fritz.

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