

THE IDLE AMERICAN

Price is No Object....

Commentary by Dr. Don Newbury

Column #1,078 for Release Week of February 12, 2024, or Later

In our mind's eye, most of us old-timers recall taking on life in slow motion when contrasted with today's starts, stops and swerves now endured by the masses by day and by night. If identified with a fable, we were the turtles, and jet-setters of today are the hares.

Or so it seems.

In bygone days, it was common to hear the same question posed repeatedly: "Have you heard the one about?".... Then, jokes of the day were exchanged; hearty laughter followed. Now, with the Super Bowl in our rearview mirror, the question most often heard is likely to be, "Did you see the commercial about?".... After all, 30-second pitches going for \$7 million for a single Super Bowl TV spot is way north of "chump change." For those keeping score, this is 55% more than Super Bowl ads just five years ago....

Blame it on inflation; everyone else does. About 75 years ago, for example, newfangled vending machines were geared to accept nickels. (Mentioning a nickel to youngsters now may draw quizzical looks. These are the same kids who understandably question what we mean by "hanging up" telephones.)

Anyways, we could buy candy bars, sodas, gum, jaw-breakers and other confectionery items for one nickel. (Aside: The big boys at the pool hall said five cents would also buy one game on a pinball machine, with the promise of free games for players who could run up high scores without "tilting" the machine.)

In the mid-1940s, my late uncle Jimmie Newbury returned from World War II naval service to enroll in college. He visited one day, bragging about winning a dozen free pinball games with a single nickel. My dad, keenly remembering Great Depression deprivation, answered, "Congratulations, Jimmie, but when it was all said and done, who had the nickel?"...

When soda pop went up to six cents a bottle, vending machines had it tough. They became evil machines, even pounded upon.

There was national unrest--with revolts alleged in some regions--at the thought of a 20% increase. Some merchants tried to soften the blow of the price hike with clever signage. One read: "Our cold drinks are all sick scents."

This furor seems unbelievably quaint, right?....

Clever ad and PR people now find ways to have their cake and munch away on it, too.

A decade ago, WestJet, a Canadian airline, unveiled a masterful promotion that gained millions of inches of newspaper coverage throughout the free world. Additionally, radio/ TV and social media exploded with accounts of the airline's "Christmas surprise."

At a Canadian airport, passengers stopped at a Christmas display to respond to what they thought was a Santa Claus mannequin. They were asked to show boarding passes and what they wanted for Christmas....

There were soup-to-nuts requests for socks, diamond rings, big screen TVs, and numerous other items. (There'd have been requests for all things Taylor Swift, but she wasn't famous at the time.)

What passengers didn't know was that their requests were being heard by WestJet employees at the arrival airport. The employees had three hours to purchase, wrap and write names on gifts that were given to deplaning passengers!

The airline sprung for cost of gifts, but this initiative avoided what would have cost millions of dollars if they'd purchased ads trumpeting "Merry Christmas." The good will generated was inestimable....

Social media are at center stage currently for what is being called "The Consumer Chex Index." Kylie Brakeman, a NYC comedian, loves the snack, usually buying 8.75-ounce bags. The price, it turns out, is all over the charts in airports, ranging from \$3.49 in New Orleans to \$13.29 in Las Vegas.

She is revolting, and the brouhaha--like the \$18 Big Mac combo at McDonald's--has gone viral.

Check it out online with search words like "Chex Mix furor." The snack's moguls may be scratching their heads, unsure if they should praise Kylie or refuse to laugh at her jokes....

Dr. Newbury is a longtime university president who writes weekly and speaks publicly throughout Texas. Contact: Email: newbury@speakerdoc.com. Phone: 817-447-3872.