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THE FUNNY PAGES | TRUE-LIFE TALES

Free Refills

By TODD BARRY

I got an e-mail message a few months ago. I didn't immediately recognize the name of the sender. It said something like: "Hey, Todd, we haven't rapped in a while. I work for" — and here he mentioned the name of a major cake company. "Do you want some swag?"

For those of you who don't know, swag is basically free stuff, usually promotional in nature (like a T-shirt with a radio-station name on it). Sometimes swag is bad (like a T-shirt with a radio station name on it), and sometimes it's good (like a gift certificate for a massage or that expensive leather carry-on bag that a friend helped me sell on eBay). And yes, I want some.

I was pretty sure I knew who had sent me the e-mail message, but I had to find out for sure. I wrote to him and asked if he was the same guy who once gave me a free gym membership after I did a benefit comedy show. It turned out he was. The guy who used to work for a major fitness company was now working for a major cake company.

I wrote back with my address, wondering what cake-company swag would consist of. Believe it or not, I was partly hoping that it wouldn't consist of actual cake. My doctor had just told me that I was consuming too much sugar. He didn't mention cake specifically, but I'm betting he would have if the appointment had lasted more than four minutes.

I came back from an out-of-town trip and found a U.P.S.-package notice in my mailbox. I went to the U.P.S. warehouse, where they handed me a box so large I had to get in a cab to bring it home. I don't want to appear cheap, but I have to confess that I was now a little bothered that I was paying for something that was supposed to be free. But I also knew that whatever was inside the box was probably worth more than the cab fare.

I dragged the box home and opened it up. There was no cake inside. Along with some promotional items (a bag and a mug with the cake-company logo), there was a sleek modern coffee maker. Not just any coffee maker, but one of those new "pod" coffee makers that let you make one cup at a time. This raises the question, "Todd, what if you want to make two cups?" Well, there's a special "two pod" holder that lets me do this. "Todd, what if you want to make a pot of coffee?" If I wanted to make a pot of coffee, that would mean I had people over. I don't have people over.

I successfully used the coffee maker for about two weeks, and then it stopped working. I tried to fix it myself, using the instruction manual and the manufacturer's Web site. It still didn't work. It was time to call the pros.

I rang up the customer tech-support line. The woman who answered talked to me for about 30 seconds before concluding that the coffee maker had to be replaced. Replaced? Slow down, tiger! Let's do some trouble-shootin'! Tell me about a button I'm not pushing. Have me unplug something, then plug it in again. That always works for my cable.

She said that she would send me labels so I could return it. Labels? Was I going to have to pack this thing up and stand in line at the post office and then wait for another one to arrive? Are you at least going to send me a box with those labels? I decided to call back, thinking that tech-support people are like any other workers — some are better than others. Maybe this woman was the worst tech-support person at the coffee-maker company. Perhaps her nickname was Jump-the-Gun Jenny.

The second guy I dealt with was more thorough, but came to the same conclusion. He started to mention labels, when I said, "I think some labels are already on the way."

I hung up and realized I had no choice. I had to write to the guy who hooked me up to begin with and lay it out for him. I wrote him a short, sheepish e-mail message that basically said: "Hey, got the coffee maker. It broke. I'm not trying to scam another one, but. . .can I have another one?"

The guy wrote back and reassured me it was cool to ask. He even used the term "no worries," and since he's not Australian, I took these words seriously. Then he c.c.'d me on an e-mail message he sent to another employee, asking her to send me another coffee maker. Then she e-mailed me, asking what color I wanted. Wow. I didn't get a choice the first time around. I went on the coffee maker's Web site and looked at the choices. How about. . .blue! I got yet another e-mail message, asking me what flavor coffee I wanted! How about some . . . medium roast! I know, you'd expect a more exotic flavor coming out of a blue coffee maker.

A few days later I received my beautiful new coffee maker and several bags of coffee pods — medium roast plus some flavors I didn't even ask for. The coffee maker works great. I will tell people about it. They will tell other people, causing the kind of frenzy you read about in "The Tipping Point." Now I wonder if he'll send me some cake?

Todd Barry is a comedian whose last True-Life Tale was about teaching the deaf. His Web site is www.toddbarry.com.

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