

Waste No Tears On Sears

By Vicki Schultz

I would include a photo with this opinion piece, but I can't. Sears wouldn't sell me one.

On the Sunday before Father's Day, I peered over the photographer's shoulder in a cramped Sears Portrait Studio, praying for a miracle. As my blonde-haired, blue-eyed sons, ages two and four, rolled around on the shabby white backdrop, I realized this was insufficient cause for Divine intervention. So I took matters into my own hands, literally – using fingers to pull my cheeks into the grin I did not feel and pushing my nose into a pig snout. I shamelessly made the faces my mother had warned me about, hoping all the while I wouldn't “get stuck like that.” But even if I did, it would be worth it, I thought, if only my boys would smile at the camera, together, just once.

As the digital images popped up on the monitor over the next grueling twenty minutes, I started to relax. Out of about ten shots, I deemed two worthy of purchase. One would have been miraculous enough; two was a veritable treasure trove. My elastic face had even snapped back to its natural, weary state – an added bonus. Perhaps God had been listening, after all.

You see, beyond the fact that little boys are simply not designed to sit still and smile on command, my eldest finds it even more difficult than most, because he has autism. Half the time we were there, he had covered his eyes with his hands or darted away just before the camera had clicked. Not to mention all the time he had spent pushing his little brother out of the frame. This had been his worst portrait experience yet. But the photos I longed for were finally within my grasp – or so I thought.

When the boys mutinied, dashing off the set, my husband eagerly joined them. I was well satisfied, so I let them run free. As I stayed behind to place our order, the two young women working that day looked at me with pinched expressions. It seemed we had not fulfilled the six-pose minimum that Sears requires; we'd technically only managed three. The fuzzy teddy bears and rubber duckies had

not been used; the blue-sky backdrop hadn't seen the light of day. They said our sons would have to sit for three more poses in order to purchase *any* photos from the shoot. That's right, it was all or nothing. *Company policy. Our hands are tied, ma'am.*

I was in tears. I even played the autism card to its fullest, something I hate to do. "You mean to tell me you can't make an exception for a child with a disability? Are you serious?" The answer, shockingly, was, "Yes." So instead of making a sale, brightening a stressed mom's day, and preserving my boys' faces on glossy eight by tens, Sears lost a customer that day. I hate to be petty, but I hope they lose more.

A ridiculous, arbitrary policy had made me cry. The anger that followed dried my eyes with its heat. I thought about all the moms I've met whose autistic children could never endure six-poses, involving backdrop changes, prop-swapping and physical contortions, all while saying, "Cheese!" Perhaps we have more to cry about than most, these moms and I. We can't waste our tears on Sears.

I've never been a big proponent of, "The customer is always right." But I heartily believe in the motto, "Do the right thing." When a corporate policy ties the hands of its employees, making it impossible to satisfy a customer's reasonable request, that policy has to go. And when it fails to take into account the special needs of people with disabilities, it is unconscionable.

Companies don't feel compassion – people do. Empowered employees, free to use their best judgment in tricky situations, just might win the loyalty of a customer who would otherwise go on to spread bad publicity. Business owners and managers would be wise to foster such a workforce.

My experience with Sears Portrait Studio was an opportunity lost for all involved: Time was wasted, no sale was made, and I went home empty-handed. It could have been a win-win:

- 30 minutes of photographer's time: \$20
- Two portrait packages: \$50
- Feeling Mom gets while hanging pictures of her two beautiful sons: priceless