

Changing Times Tough on Consumers

A MERICAN consumers have been pampered in the past by competitive businesses striving to outdo one another to win their patronage.

Changes taking place in the world of merchandising are pushing consumers into a less favorable position, although merchants would quickly deny that they are benefiting from the shift.

These developments are the result of a number of forces, most of which are beyond control of either seller or buyer. Some may be attributed to inflation, others to regulations, and a few to changing attitudes within our society.

Although supermarkets and department stores offer thousands of items for sale, examination may reveal a disappointing array of mediocre merchandise, lacking in craftsmanship. Where quality is available, inflation may have forced prices to unaffordable levels.

The high cost of carrying over seasonal inventories sometimes results in scarcity of certain items, because merchants are reluctant to reorder when original supplies are sold out.

Promotion of "no brand" or generic drugs and foods has not won popular support but it tends to undermine standards of quality.

For generations, petroleum companies sought to improve their sales through quality products, clean service stations and smiling attendants. Then, almost overnight, brand name distinctions were virtually wiped out by gasoline shortages.

The "death blow" to courteous service resulted from high wages for minimum work. Now customers service their own cars and pay more for the privilege. About the same thing is true in restaurants.

Many retail stores have given up on trying to train clerks to be helpful to customers. Buyers must wait on themselves and if they seek information from employees, they may find the latter know little about the merchandise and care less. There are exceptions, of course.

Government regulation and paperwork have become major burdens for business owners. Add to these costs losses due to theft by employees and shoplifting by cus-

tomers, and it becomes obvious that consumers would have to pay more even if there were no inflation.

Steps are being taken in Washington to alleviate excessive regulations but it may be years before effective relief is identifiable. It is estimated that federal requirements add from \$200 to \$500 to the cost of each American automobile, while union labor demands continually drive up costs of steel and other materials, as well as manufacturing.

"The automobile industry is considering raising its prices again at a time when sales are down and still declining," an Oklahoma car dealer commented to this writer recently.

Electronic and other industries have felt similar pressures, resulting in loss of jobs as imported products flooded the markets.

Although stores still offer a broad selection of merchandise in abundance, we seem to be slipping considerably from our previous high standards of quality and service. Limits on free enterprise ultimately become limits on our standard of living.