

Point of No Return

By Reg P. Wydeven
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In September our son Matthew was born. Other than having some irate hair, he's doing really well. So well, in fact, that he is being questioned by a California grand jury because investigators believe he and Barry Bonds have the same trainer. Matthew went from wearing size 3-6 month clothes right to wearing size 12 month – he just skipped the 6-9 month size.

That's why I went to our local department store to return a couple of size 6-9 month outfits our friends gave Matthew as gifts. I couldn't find the receipt, but I wasn't worried because the outfits still had the tags on, including the price tag showing the store's name on it with only the actual price crossed out.

When I tried to return the outfits, I felt like a suspect on *NYPD Blue* and the clerk was doing his best Detective Sipowicz impersonation. After taking a polygraph test, the clerk finally believed me and allowed me to return the outfits. I had to fill out a form, however, and provide him with my driver's license.

After he opened my file, he informed me that I would not be getting cash, but rather in-store credit. When I came back to the service desk with a box a diapers I was going to take in exchange for the outfits, the clerk informed me that I can only use the in-store credit in the department that the returned items came from. So back I went to the baby clothes section to pick up some onesies.

Many shoppers hoping to return Christmas presents may be interrogated like I was because many retailers across the country are attempting to crack down on "serial returners", or those folks who repeatedly exchange or return items. Billions of dollars are lost each year in the retail industry because of "return fraud." Return fraud includes shoplifted items that people try to return for cash or "borrowed" items that customers wore once and then returned.

Stores will now routinely ask customers to fill out paperwork and to provide a drivers license when they attempt to return merchandise. This information is then sent to The Return Exchange, a company out of Irvine, California. The Return Exchange collects this data from retailers all across the country and compiles a list of serial returners. Stores may deny customers' attempts to return goods if they are labeled as a serial returner, amounting to a blacklist.

The data collected by The Return Exchange is not shared with or sold to any other companies, including credit agencies, but is only provided to the retailer that supplied the information. Also, data that could potentially be the subject of discrimination laws, such as age, gender, race, nationality, physical characteristics and martial status, are not tracked by The Return Exchange.

Legally, stores are not obligated to accept returned merchandise or even accept exchanges. "All sales are final" policies are perfectly legal, however, most stores do accept returns or exchanges as a courtesy to maintain customer relations.

If you want to see if you are a labeled as a serial returner, you can contact The Return Exchange directly by calling their toll-free number (1(800)-652-2331) or by emailing them at ReturnActivityReport@TheReturnExchange.com.

Because it took so long to fill out the paperwork and eventually exchange the outfits for the onesies, Matthew had outgrown them by the time I got home.

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