

Magazine

What Will Service Work Look Like Under Amazon?

On Money

By JOHN HERRMAN JULY 18, 2017

At 9 p.m. Eastern time on July 10, Amazon initiated its annual show of force: Prime Day, a 30-hour exercise in the fullest possible expression of what Amazon can do. The sale, timed to the company's "birthday," is marketed with an urgency bordering on panic. What's for sale? Basically anything. Where is it for sale? Wherever you are. Some sales last the whole prolonged day; others last a few minutes. A car seat. Golf clubs. Jeans and a screen door. Turmeric extract. A gallon of Elmer's glue. An Amazon product — the voice-controlled Echo, which can order more products from Amazon. Makeup brushes. Jumper cables. A tablet computer. The shopping experience is at turns euphoric and anxiety-inducing, Amazon's already-busy interface teeming with decontextualized blinking numbers: *Sunglasses by "Hulislem," \$16.79, down from \$115.95 after a previous discount to \$28.99, 86 percent off, ends in 2:08:51, 63 percent already claimed. No? Next. Pro Series Waist Trimmer: \$15.16-\$18.96, 22 percent claimed, ends in . . . 0:00:43. Damn. Time is running out.*

As far as holidays go, Prime Day is contrived, crass and extremely effective (the company's "biggest day ever," it says). This is not a venue for voting with your wallet or a cultivating a consumer identity. It's about clicking a button that initiates a mysterious process carried out by teams of invisible laborers and automated

processes and results in a package at your door within two days. That package will contain one or more products that were probably built in a special economic zone in a faraway country; transported by ship, truck or perhaps one of Amazon's newly leased "Prime Air" planes; warehoused and waiting in one of the company's gargantuan and strategically placed fulfillment centers; sorted by subcontracted laborers, robots or both; and left at your door by whatever means necessary, be it U.P.S., FedEx, the United States Postal Service or a gig worker driving around in the family Accord. Prime Day is the opposite of precious; it is an awe-inspiring project dedicated to moving product and making money.

Amazon's yearly bonanza is a production that feels almost provocatively distant from the image cultivated by Whole Foods, which Amazon recently announced it would buy for a reported \$13.4 billion. In 1996, years before Amazon turned a profit, the Whole Foods chief executive, John Mackey, was articulating a vision of his own. "Whole Foods is a mission-driven business," he told The New York Times in August of that year, as yearly sales were on track for \$850 million. "We have other goals besides making money. If you are going to tap into deeper motivational energies, you need more than money."

Mackey's was perhaps the clearest articulation of a species of corporate messaging that emerged in the '90s and took hold in the 2000s: that of the reluctant captain of industry, the community-minded national chain and the compassionate employer. (Think Trader Joe's, the Container Store, Panera Bread, Starbucks or Jamba Juice.) It was accompanied by the rise of the conscientious — and typically affluent — consumer, for whom purchases could be not just materially but also morally aspirational. The food was ethically sourced, but crucially, the labor was, too.

Lately this moment in the American service industry feels somewhat distant. It was a response to a different time: Retail and service jobs were on the rise, both in objective terms and in their share of the total work force. From 1989 to 1999, while the economy lost more than 1.4 million manufacturing jobs, it gained more than twice as many in retail alone. Back then, some said that with a few twists of the dial and a better-educated class of consumers, service work could be remade into

something more careerlike, offering employees structure, predictability and dignity — and wealthier customers a form of absolution.

It was, mainly, good marketing — triumphant liberal ideals expressed in the language of the heart. The economy of the late '90s was characterized by exuberant consumerism; companies like Whole Foods had devised a way to make people feel better about the products they were buying as well as the people they were interacting with. Whole Foods employees, customers were informed, earned a “fair” wage; they had a say in how stores were managed and in what products they stocked; they were voluntarily given benefits; they were not regarded as employees but as “team members,” working for their employer’s profit while keeping an eye on the health and betterment of their communities.

This was a heartening vision for the future of the service sector, at least in comparison to the prevailing stereotypes of the time — the burger-flipping teen, the seasonal retail employee — which were growing increasingly antiquated. It was also an opportunistic pose, a strategy, subject to constant and total revision. Mackey, a self-described libertarian, had an angle to his munificence: As he saw it, his employees’ good fortunes were entirely dependent on his company, not government largess or regulations, and certainly not organized labor. (Mackey has compared unions to herpes: “It doesn’t kill you, but it’s unpleasant and inconvenient, and it stops a lot of people from becoming your lover.”) After nearly a quarter-century of sustained growth, Whole Foods — a victim of overexpansion and a tired economy — entered a period of uncertainty that ended in its sale.

Amazon’s grand proclamations, on the other hand, tend to focus on domination, not on providing any sort of abstract benefit to society outside the lowering of prices and the delivery of goods. The company has never put forth a rosy vision of the future of service labor. Amazon warehouse work is hard, often subcontracted and kept out of sight of consumers. According to a 2015 investigation by The Times, even at the corporate office, the work culture is unapologetically ruthless.

Amazon’s attitude toward labor is emblematic of the culture it grew out of — and an augur of the service economy that’s on the rise today. Other tech

companies, in particular platforms like Uber and TaskRabbit, have helped regular consumers grow comfortable with a software-mediated system wherein jobs are sliced into an endless series of assignments, with compensation negotiated wordlessly, instantly and without room for a second thought. Even Starbucks — once a champion of compassionate capitalism — recently began experimenting with pitiless automated scheduling software to assign shifts, before backing off after public outcry.

Amazon's plans for Whole Foods are the subject of plenty of speculation. But one thing is certain: The Mackey marketing playbook — bringing labor to the fore in order to assure customers that they are A-O.K. and in good hands — has little to offer Amazon, which can and does regard labor as a simple commodity. In contrast to Whole Foods, which focuses in its marketing on fair-trade and locally sourced offerings, Amazon is made up of a dizzying array of supply chains that are effectively invisible: not hidden, just easily omitted from the consumer experience.

I didn't lay eyes on a single Amazon employee during Prime Day, except for the home-shopping-marathon talent, leaving the onus on me to wonder what was going on behind the scenes. Aside from the "origin scan" on my track-your-shipment page, I won't know a thing about where my package came from, or be reminded of how it got to me. I will be told nothing about Hulislem. Amazon need not bother to tell a story; in fact, its goal is to reduce the retail story to a single button, an instant, an unprecedentedly complex process taken for granted.

Mackey sought to build a more ethical company, and to herald a more ethical mode of consumption. He sought to take the politics out of labor and the labor out of politics. Amazon, by contrast, doesn't try to tell you yet another story about what it does and who it pays to do it. It bets — rightly, ruthlessly — that you'd be more comfortable with no story at all.

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