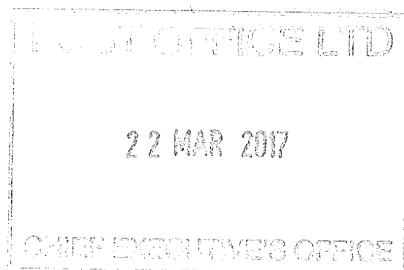


JW

Mr M. D. Summers



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Paula Vennells,  
Finsbury Dials 20,  
Finsbury Street,  
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CONCERNS OF A SUBPOSTMASTER

19<sup>th</sup> March 2017

Dear Ms. Vennells,

Two years ago, my wife and I, under took a complete change in life direction and chose to take on the ownership and running of the Post Office and convenience store, here, in Devon. We have wide ranging and varied backgrounds, but neither of us has experienced working with the Post Office before. My experiences in these 2 years have been surprising, to say the least. I do not have high aspirations. I do not believe that I have standards that are particularly high. I, simply, aim to provide for my family by offering our customers an effective service that motivates them to return and hopefully build their enthusiasm for, and reliance on, the facility we offer. I am incredulous that The Post Office seems to be at odds with this aim.

My first true experience of working with the Post Office came with the initial training course in Portsmouth. My comments about this are as follows:

- 1) The course was a little drawn out, but that may have been appropriate for the other students. Subsequently, I have found that it failed to cover many of the significant aspects that a new subpostmaster needs in every day trading.
- 2) It was conducted by a very capable trainer, for whom I could not speak highly enough, but I believe he had only ever worked for the Post Office so his advice was given based on this background.
- 3) The course also had a twist towards "selling". The advice given was, in no way, consistent with my understanding of promoting customer long term spend.

The business I took over was probably not the most refined enterprise ever seen, and I have had to spend considerable time wading through my predecessor's heritage. It is, however, a close knit, small, community.

A trainer was supplied for my first 5 days of my new undertaking. This trainer was not entirely useful! The trainer was able to assist with everyday transactions and regular back office functions. He did not, however, have a grasp of the ATM and struggled with the administration of other aspects like scratchcards and the lottery. He also had severe trouble with customer interactions, seriously misjudging a jokey style and I had to work hard not to alienate my new customers in my first few days. I have had to learn and devise my own understanding and strategies for everyday operation.

Set free to operate, I was left with the NBSC help line. I have spoken to some truly excellent operators. Some have understood the problems, listened and were pragmatic in their responses (Wendy). Some have not reached this standard. All too often, when struggling with a difficult customer, I have had my problems multiplied by an NBSC assistant talking authoritatively on a subject unrelated to the problem because they have REFUSED to listen. The helpline only seems to be able to read from the Horizon help pages. I can read the help pages. If the problem lies outside the information in these help pages, a response is rarely available. The help line is now rarely used due to its lack of value, not to mention time delay. When talking to many NBSC help line staff there seems to be an underlying belief that, "The Post Office" is in some way superior to customers and staff. There is a general failure to understand that The Post Office is a commercial organisation like any other, which needs to compete and work for its customers in order to survive, just like any other commercial organisation.

I have been fortunate to benefit from a refit. There was an effort to get me to accept a single combi counter added to my retail counter. I was told that it would reduce staffing issues. Fortunately, I achieved a 2 position open plan format and this has been very necessary. It transpired that my "customer count" has an effect on the support I receive. If I only had a single combi counter I would now have no ability to do "Drop and Go". You are counting my customers, I cannot sell stamps from my retail counter without a penalty – I am doomed if I do, doomed if I don't. The customers lose again. The policies promoted by Post Office staff are highly contradictory.

I had a visit from another trainer. This trainer had a serious "selling" twist! She managed to alienate customers and staff within minutes with her determined approach to cross sell anything at any cost. I will refuse this trainer any access to my facility in the future.

I have had a number of accounting issues which have failed to be clearly resolved. I am not keen on the clarity of Horizon in everyday use, it can't be considered to be "user friendly" by modern standards. In combination with the lack of "in depth" information, I have had a great shortage of confidence that finances have actually been equitable. On one occasion excess funds were returned to the Cash Office. This resulted in unnecessary transactions in and out of suspense accounts with the result that I am not sure the problem was correctly resolved. I have no transparent way of checking or showing the consequence. Similarly, I have recently had a problem with a Health lottery transaction. An attempted cancellation failed. NBSC eventually argued that Quick picks cannot be cancelled, The Health Lottery assured me that it had been cancelled. I have lost £25, but have no way of showing it. Once again NBSC help lines respond with unbelievable arrogance, and a failure to accept any scenario other than their own construct. ( I was also shocked to be offered £25 by my contract manager to make the problem "go away" ). They also seem to be unable to demonstrate, succinctly, that transactions have been completed correctly. Another recent event resulted in the loss of a mass "Drop and Go" transaction. A large number of labels were printed for "Signed for" mails, without the customer's account being debited or the transactions being recorded on Horizon when the system reset button was accidentally knocked. NBSC then wanted me to charge the customer's account for the labels even though the customer could not have received the "signed for" service requested. The level of lost sales data is clearly astounding and very worrying, especially when the results seem to be costs to me.

My greatest concern revolves around "customer care". There are several controversial areas here:

- 1) The Post Office is known for its queues but I do not accept that we should accept them. It seems clear that Horizon and other systems do not make minimal transaction time a priority.

i) Accounting for Christmas stamps was not made clear to me, prior to last year, with the consequence that I received nearly no Christmas stock this year ( now resolved ). This accounting mishap occurs because Horizon expects me to sell Christmas stamps from a different Horizon button to normal stamps. The Christmas stamp button is not on the front page taking extra time and potential errors to attain. I have no intention of selling Christmas stock from different buttons. My customers come first.

ii) Label printing is VERY slow.

iii) The changes last year requiring further data before label printing, whilst helping Royal Mail, need to be streamlined because it is SLOWER. Which customer actually generates our revenue? Royal Mail or the Mail Sender?

iv) Most transactions require far more button presses than are actually necessary. "Does the customer need any cash" is a pointless hard sell, adding extra button pushes and time wastage – it insults the customers especially when it is not possible to supplying that cash without effectively starting a new transaction. The return from this is dwarfed by the cost in time and irritation. Why doesn't the customer come first?

2) "Drop and Go" in principle is great! In reality it is not. Horizon has so many glitches that it is too easy to make irreversible errors. I also find I have customers for who "Drop and Go" would be ideal but who are unprepared to sign up or pay up front. Often customers have a one off bulk consignment. These customers see no point in "signing up" but they can cause big queues. Bulk dispatches need a lot more attention. I personally, have on occasions, taken on the liability, paid for the customer to be reimbursed later. I cannot normally do this without unreasonable risk.

3) I have been repeatedly under pressure from the Post Office trainers to "Push" financial service. Without a consistent banking system customers will never trust the Post Office for further financial transactions. Post Office savings cards, Santander and other bank services are not harmonised – this costs time and cause errors. It certainly causes confusion. A customer trying to open a savings account at a subpostoffice sees little more than a form being sent off. Confidence is very low. I am actually allowed to do very little so I am not viewed as a portal for such products. Customers expect professionalism from people they trust with their money, The Post Office fails this test.

4) I sell Euros but I'm not allowed to sell Travel Money Cards. It seems odd that I have to sell a vast amount of currency before being entitled to hold these cards. The customers want them..... Thankfully this situation seems to have changed with the new Travel Money card.

In general my experiences of the Post Office so far have been very disappointing.

My best revenue returns are clearly from offering Post Office/ Royal Mail core services. I need to be able to provide these in an efficient way to compete with Collect+, Hermes etc - the Post Office is not supporting me in this. I need to be able to conduct transactions in a timely manner – without excuses. When I visit other Post Offices I am horrified at what are described as "Legacy" issues. With a national image consistent with "Legacy" issues I have a massive task to convince my potential customers that we are trying to be efficient and effective. These "Legacy" issues seem to run deep through the infrastructure of the Post Office and I presume to be responsible for the perceived arrogance exhibited from supporting departments.

When I am confident that my core services are secure I can promote other services, but I cannot risk the confidence of my customers.

The Post Office is promoting a "hard sell" approach. McDonalds stopped shouting "Can I help you please" at their customers many years ago. This "forced selling" does not work and alienates customers. If the customer remains for the transaction, they do not return. Customers need to be treated with respect – they are going to fund us – the more modern marketing techniques that I have seen and understood are far more sophisticated and subtle. If we do not use better selling and marketing methods our competitors will. I was recently offered marketing and selling advice from the Post Office. The advice included how to have "conversations" with customers. Maybe there are cultural issues between Bolton and Devon, but I regarded that as an insult. I believe my customers regard these "conversations" as insulting too – they recognise when they are being treated in a condescending, unsubtle, way. I have absolutely no regard for these techniques and consequently no regard for people advancing this method. Communicating will always be a key, but the Post Office approach fails to communicate comfortable messages that can be received by an increasingly complex customer base.

I feel very insecure in the lack of transparency of Post Office/Horizon accounting. I am aware that Horizon will be updated next year. At this point, I am trying to be optimistic about this, but I have very little confidence that good decisions have been made, especially since I suspect there are some "Legacy Ivory Towers" to surmount regarding accountancy matters

The contents of this letter are only my view. I understand that, even with the desire to promote a more mature culture, that legacy issues would make any change challenging. I must express my deep frustration at a situation I view as completely unnecessary.

Would you please give consideration to, at least, supporting subpostmasters who want commercial success using methods not wedded to "Legacy". Would you please promote communication skills throughout the Post Office. Please promote talking to everyone, all staff and customers, with respect, as equals, ALL have a contribution to make. Hierarchy within the Post Office seems to be seriously misjudged.

Achieving a profitable operation is getting harder and efficiency is needed. Please recognise what efficiency is.

I sincerely hope that I will be able to continue to operate my convenience store and Post Office for the benefit of my family and the community but, at present, contrary to need, it will be "in spite" of the Post Office and not because of the Post Office.

Yours Sincerely

**GRO**

Martin Summers – Whitchurch Post Office – FAD 3435393