

Everyone's a critic

Earlier this month, clothing designer Giorgio Armani banned *The New York Times* fashion critic Cathy Horyn from the runway show that introduced his fall 2008 collection. He apparently didn't like some things she had said in past reviews.

The ban made a splash in the very small pond of fashion journalism, but in the aftermath, Horyn made a good point: When people can see a runway show themselves over the Internet, why do they need critics at all? "Frankly," Horyn writes, "I would be much more excited if [Armani] unburdened himself of the whole system, closed down the shows, stopped with the backstage stroking session and went directly over the Internet to the public."

In a recent blog entry, marketer Seth Godin also discussed critics, writing about his friend Joanne Kates, the restaurant reviewer for Toronto's *The Globe and Mail*. Kates tries to stay anonymous by using a credit card without her name on it and by wearing wigs, but restaurants all over the city post her photo in their kitchens—and when a server spots her, the restaurant can alter its normal behaviors. But then, Godin says:

"You've already guessed the problem with this strategy. The problem is Zagats (and Chowhound.com, and a thousand other restaurant blogs). There isn't just one Joanne Kates in Toronto anymore. Now there are thousands. You can no longer be on the lookout for Joanne. Now you have to be on the lookout for everyone."

Maybe you choose movies, restaurants, music, books, museum shows, fashions, TV programs and much more because a critic wrote a glowing review. But it's just as likely that you made your choice based on something a trusted friend said—even if that friend is a perfect stranger who posted something on a blog you frequent.

In the world of new media, your organization needs to treat every customer like a potential critic. Make sure you're offering:

- The best seat in the house. (There should be no bad seats.)
- Gracious service. (From answering the phone to resolving disputes.)
- Quality ingredients. (Food, performances, or a museum show that's worth the trip.)
- Cleanliness. (No gum under the tables, no unethical practices.)
- A fair price. (And billing that explains it clearly.)
- Error-free work. (Buttons that don't fall off, memoirs that are true.)
- Fresh goods. (Just-popped popcorn—with lots of real butter.)

Word-of-mouth has always been a powerful marketing tool—but now the whole world's talking. What will they say about you?

Well said.

Quality survives.

Leonard Maltin, film critic

