

ON YOUR SIDE

Contest glitch puts Future Shop on hot seat

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Future Shop started an online contest this week, called Beat the Clock, designed to boost traffic at its website.

Instead, the company suffered an embarrassing computer glitch on the first night (Sept. 14). This led to a deep discount lasting longer than the 15 minutes it was supposed to last. Many customers believed they were getting an Xbox 360 video game unit at \$99.99 (more than two-thirds off the regular price of \$329.99). Their orders were confirmed by email and later cancelled as a "misprint."

This resulted in a buzz of complaints at Internet forums, including some hosted by Future Shop. "I purchased my Elite Xbox 360 bundle last night for \$99.99 and received a confirmation email this morning guaranteeing my purchase," said a comment at Future Shop's online community forum.

"Of course, 20 minutes ago, I get an email cancelling my order. I understand that futureshop.ca may have made an error extending their promotion but that is their fault.

"I am a paying customer who took advantage of this deal. Whether it was a mistake or not, it is still Future Shop's mistake and they should incur the losses that come as a result of it."

The moderator quickly cut off such comments, telling others to send complaints to the customer service department.

Future Shop has more than 16,000 fans at its Facebook page, which started getting inundated with negative feedback. But some positive comments appeared later in the week.

"And so what if your orders got cancelled?" said one company defender. "They are not charging a dime onto your credit cards."

Christopher Bennett, a Future Shop spokesman, said companies participating in social media must accept criticism along with praise. He said the Facebook comments would be left untouched.

Beat the Clock was supposed to be a scavenger hunt, giving players a short time to search for clues and break codes to win a deeply discounted prize.

Only five or six bargains were available in each contest, which was rolled out across Canada in different time zones each night.

Bennett said there was "a time zone glitch." The \$99.99 Xbox 360 deal wasn't cut off after the winners claimed their rewards and kept being offered to others.

Future Shop did extensive testing before launching the contest, he said, adding that it was impossible to give the same great deal to all customers who were affected by the pricing error.

According to the contest rules, Future Shop says it will not be responsible for, or liable to any promotion entrant, for "any computer, online, telephone or technical malfunctions, or errors that may occur, regardless of the cause."

To compensate losers for their inconvenience it offered a 5 per cent discount on future purchases.

Future Shop also has several Twitter pages, such as [Twitter.com/FS_](https://twitter.com/FS_) that deals with 4,700 followers. They also fielded complaints, as did a new Twitter page set up this week by a customer, who called it (what else?) FutureShopSucks.

Scott Edelman, who failed to win the Xbox, did win the second night's contest for a BluRay DVD player (listed at \$229.99 and sold at \$79.99).

However, he was charged the wrong amount in sales taxes.

After spending time trying to get the error corrected, he was told yesterday that a credit card adjustment would show up in about a week.

"Future Shop is clearly unable to make their products available at their advertised prices and should be held accountable," Edelman said.

Memo to companies: Don't disappoint your customers, especially when they're young and likely to curse you at your own websites. Test, test and test again until all the glitches are gone.

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