

THE HAPPINESS MACHINE ENCOUNTER

A representative amalgamation of many improvised encounters

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Time: It is mid-November, 2014, the week leading up to Black Friday, during a record-setting cold spell. The holiday advertising blitz is accelerating noticeably for the first time this week and will hit a breakneck pace on Black Friday.

MANAGER (Nick Benacerraf) stands on the street outside the Happiness Machines installation on 37th St and 8th Ave. He holds a tray of hot chocolate, coffee, and spiced cider. He wears a Happiness Machines lanyard nametag, a festive holiday sweater, and a Happiness Machines red winter cap. Classic holiday music (think Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald) plays inside and outside the store.

MANAGER offers warm drinks and Hershey's Kisses™ to entice passersby. Some of them curiously stop by the window on their own volition. Some of them stop to learn more. Some of them stride by but sneak a glance of the window display—sometimes a second or third, too.

A TYPICAL CONVERSATION:

GUEST

What's going on here?

MANAGER

Good afternoon! Welcome to the Happiness Machine. Would you like a hot cider or a coffee?

GUEST

Sure...

MANAGER

We are a new corporation dedicated to preparing the nation for the American Holiday Experience, and we have been traveling across the country with this pop-up shop, designed only to spread the holiday cheer. As I'm sure you know it's an important year for the economy, and we need to do everything in our power to help our corporations in this time of need. We've set up a real American living room, with a real family inside—your family—and all your favorite holiday activities. You can make snowflakes, wrap presents, or decorate the tree.

Come on in and have a seat. It's totally free. Get out of the cold and we'll pour you a fresh cup of cider.

GUEST

It's free?

MANAGER

Absolutely. We're just here to spread the holiday cheer. You'll have an opportunity to purchase something at the end if you like but there is no obligation to do so. Come on in and put on a holiday sweater—your family has been waiting for you. *[Opens the door for GUEST.]* What's your name?

GUEST

My name is Jamal.

MANAGER

[Announcing:] Hey everybody, Jamal's here!

FAMILY warmly rises to embrace GUEST and welcome him to his seat.

MANAGER

Can we set Jamal up with a fresh cup of cider?

[THE FAMILY helps the GUEST settle in, takes his coat, offers a sweater and cider, and asks him to place the final, most beautiful ornament on the tree. (See Photos on the Flickr album for a sense of this atmosphere.) As he does this, SISTER poses for a photo with him. Everybody claps. GUEST sits down with the family for craft projects, and to speak with the other guests. They watch the Family Video on the TV—a commercial for Happiness Machines that appropriates family holiday imagery from other holiday commercials, without showing the original brand.]

[At some point during GUEST'S stay:]

MANAGER

So Jamal, what are you most excited for this holiday season?

GUEST

Actually I'm just excited to get some down time with my parents. I've been so busy I haven't gotten to enjoy any of the small things.

[MANAGER takes a small/medium sized box—an empty with nothing but a Happiness Machines Press Release inside—wraps it and labels it:

For JAMAL

30 Minutes in the Workshop with Dad.

This is intended to evoke the sentiment that GUEST most desires this season.]

[Eventually, the GUEST begins to leave:]

GUEST

This has been really great, but I have to get going.

[A bell rings. The whole FAMILY freezes in place. The atmosphere changes.]

MANAGER

Well, Jamal, is there anything in this living room that you feel especially attached to? Anything you might like to take home with you if you could? You know, everything is for sale. Everything. *[Hands GUEST the Happiness Machines Menu.]*

GUEST

Well, I like the stockings but—oh wow. That’s expensive. *[Everything is extremely over-priced.]*

MANAGER

Everything in here is a family heirloom, belonging this real family right here. Those stockings have been in the family for decades and it means a lot to them. But you’re free to take one home for \$34.99. No? No problem—we understand.

There’s one more thing. While you were here, we made a present just for you. *[MANAGER reveals present he made earlier]*

GUEST

Really?

MANAGER

You said you’re eager for some down time with your family. Well, for only \$5 you can take home *30 Minutes in the Workshop with Dad*. What do you think?

GUEST

Hmm. \$5? Okay. Yeah. I think... I will. *[GUEST takes out his wallet and offers \$5 for the present.]*

MANAGER

It was a pleasure getting to know you, Jamal. You’re always welcome here. Have a wonderful holiday season, and I hope to see you soon.

[NOTE: We calculated that we sold about 40%-50% of the presents labeled with intangible emotions or experiences. When the guests opened the present (sometimes in the gallery, sometimes later) they found the “honest” Press Release that revealed the project’s honest intentions and motivations.]