

What's Super About the Market?



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or many years my wife and I have enjoyed an amicable division of labor that has contributed to our connubial bliss. As the titular head of the household, I am assigned all the really important decisions such as whether we should go to war or if the acquisition of hog futures is in the best interest of our gross national product. She willingly assumes all the other decisions in our marriage. The only shoal that ever surfaced on our Sea of Domestic Tranquility concerned shopping.

It took a million years to develop man's ability to reason, but only a few minutes of feminine logic to destroy it. Time is money, my wife is fond of telling me, so when you go shopping take plenty of time. Samuel Butler had it right. "Logic is like the sword," he wrote. "Those who appeal to it shall perish by it."

That's why I find myself entered in the Saturday afternoon Grand Prix for shopping carts at the neighborhood Safeway.

Being a typical male, I never learned to shop properly. For example, if I like the first pair of shoes I try on, I buy them simply because they fit. I would never go in a store in the first place unless I knew exactly what I wanted, where it was and how much it was likely to cost. Feminine logic may

be irrational, irrelevant and irresponsible, but it is also irrefutable.

So I have *The List* with me in the form of a Post-it note stuck to the handle of my shopping cart. Women believe that a man should never be sent to the market without *The List*. He will fetch home a cornucopia of imported malt beverages, pretzels, and hot rod magazines, they aver, conveniently forgetting the essentials he was sent for such as triple-size cotton balls, a box of Biz and some Cuddles fabric softener. I might as well be wearing a sign stating:

CAUTION!

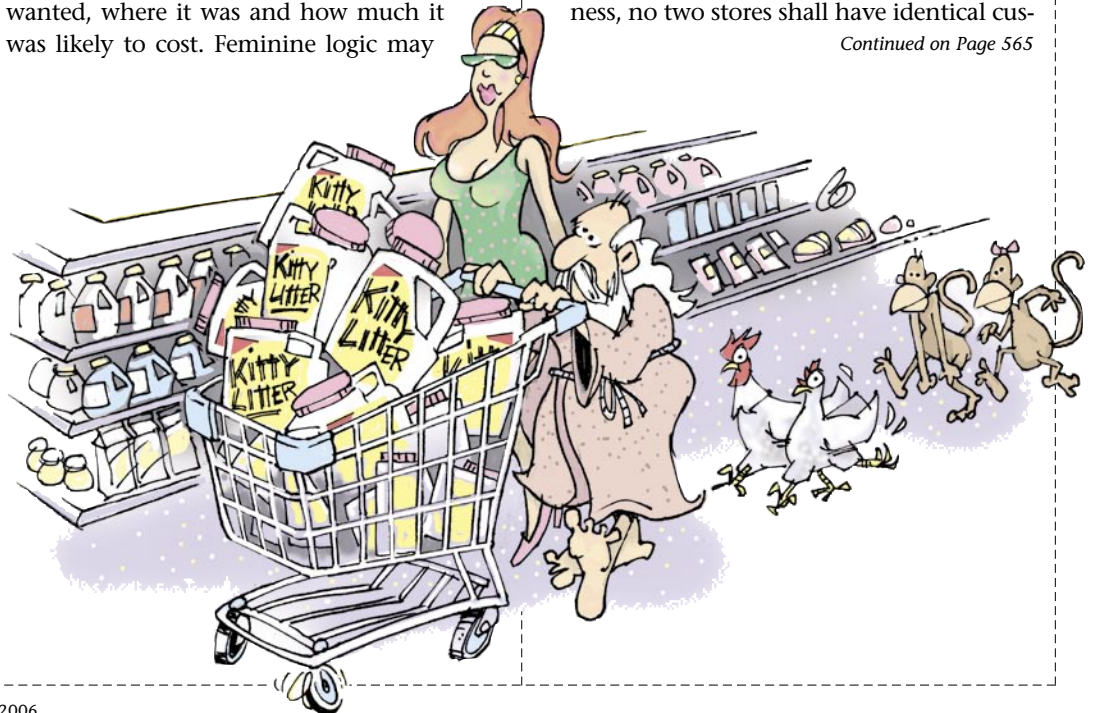
MALE IMPULSE SHOPPER

Watch for sudden stops!

Over the years, battalions of MBAs, demographic experts, human behaviorists and marketing gurus have evolved the present-day layout of supermarkets, killing off the little mom-and-pop markets where you knew where everything was in the process. Your average market today covers an area slightly larger than Rhode Island. All competing chains have agreed on the following:

■ Now that we are in the banking business, no two stores shall have identical cus-

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tomers scanners for their ATM and credit cards. Intimidated customers, not willing to stumble through a competing system, will stabilize your customer base.

■ Those stores without an in-house Bank of America, should implement one ASAP. Equity loans processed on the premises enable a family of four to purchase a week's grocery needs at one visit.

■ Shopping carts shall be large enough to hold at least \$200 worth of goods and a minimum of one unwilling child not to exceed 49 pounds in weight.

■ All carts shall consist of a wire construction that allows them to be nested with a hundred other carts. They can be separated from each other easily by any shopper currently on anabolic steroids.

■ At least two of the four wheels should be incapable of tracking in a straight line, but should chatter noisily or assume an out-of-round configuration. In the market parking lot, these carts must be easily steerable into the sides of parked cars and capable of accelerating by themselves when left unattended.

■ The standard width of a cart shall be 24 inches. The standard width of market aisles shall not exceed 40 inches. In the case of older markets, if the aisle is wide enough for two carts to pass, portable displays shall be placed every 20 feet to inhibit rapid transit past the store's own name-brands. No product should be beyond the grasp of a child riding in the cart.

■ Products consumed by the child to placate his screaming during his mother's tour of the market and not reported at the checkout station, shall be scanned as "Doing business, cost of."

■ On weekends and other busy times, at least four of the nine checkout registers shall be closed. A barrier placed across the entrance will prevent impatient customers from scanning their own groceries and departing before worried families put out an APB on them.

■ Checkout personnel at the "10 Items or Less, No Checks" register are reminded that the penalty for killing a customer presenting with 20 items and/or a

check is the loss of two (2) break periods.

■ When a survey of regular customers indicates they have mastered the store's layout to the point where they can complete their shopping in a single day, managers are required to change the position of all products on the shelves in a random manner to other areas at least 50 yards distant. This must be accomplished in a single night and no explanation shall be offered.

It was a dark day in the history of commerce when the concept of manufacturers' coupons was first offered. One can only suppose that the idea was born during a night of heavy drinking or substance abuse by executives too addled to realize what they were doing. The session must have gone something like this:

Head Man: "Why don't we take a hundred million dollars of the company's money, print up a carload of coupons offering 'cents off' on bunch of stuff that isn't moving too swift like Grandpa's Pine Tar Soap. Then we put great batches of these coupons in every mailbox in the nation, in every newspaper and magazine in existence; slip 'em under every windshield and every doorstep until we run out of trees to make the paper from."

Underling No. 1: "Great idea, chief! I bet there are millions of tiny-brained folks out there willing to spend hours cutting out these coupons so they can save a buck or two, not realizing what it costs to run the program, thus canceling the perceived savings."

Underling No. 2: "But, chief, wouldn't it be more cost-effective and better business to simply lower the prices on all these things so that even the people who won't bother with the coupons will buy the products?"

Head Man: "That's why you'll always be Number 2, Number 2. The scanners were a big mistake. People were leaving the store too quickly; we don't make any money in the parking lot except for the body and fender concessions. Keep them in the store, lined up for miles behind some person with a fist full of coupons. Then they are forced to buy the Snickers

and the Breath Savers while they sneak a look at the tabloid featuring the return of Noah to claim Debra Messing as his bride in Miami next month. Get it?"

I got it. I got a store card that will reduce the price of selected items by a few cents, provided my list reminded me to bring it. Everybody has the same card. Why not just reduce the price, save the scanning and bookkeeping time and the cost of setting up and maintaining the program? But that would be logical and logic will never learn that life seldom follows the script. CDA