



The Noble Grocer

Everyone goes to the supermarket. But not everyone sees it like I do.

I worked forty-seven years in the grocery business, starting as a bag boy in 1974. I worked every job in the store; including sorting bottles, mopping floors, cutting meat, stocking shelves, frying chicken and culling a produce rack. Later, I was a department head, an assistant manager, a store manager, produce specialist, general manager, and director of retail operations. My career in the grocery business provided my family and myself a good living; I am very grateful.

However, when I retired last year, I was full up of the grocery business. If I never set foot in another grocery store, that would be fine with me. I was done.

A year and a half later, much has changed. I'm now one of those old guys who stops by the supermarket not only to shop, but to look around and take in the action.

"Action," you might say, "why it's just a grocery store." Well, you're wrong. It might be "just a grocery store" but there's a lot going on in there. Believe me, I know.

So grab that cart with the one bad wheel and let me take you around the store. I'll show you the store the way I see it, throw in some veteran insight, and give you a few tips to use on your next visit.

You might just see the store like I do... a place of wonder.

The Building and Parking Lot.

Our tour starts as we pull into the parking lot of our neighborhood store. Take a look around, if it's broad daylight and the parking lot lights are lit the manager is asleep at the switch. Are the parking spaces well marked? The entrance and exit signage clear? Are the cart corrals in good repair? Is the lot free of trash, and are the trash cans themselves clean and emptied? Walk in the door, are the windows clean, signage up to date? How many burned out bulbs in the ceiling? Check out the bathrooms, if they're clean, continue shopping, if not, find another store. And those signs in the bathrooms that say "we strive to keep our bathrooms clean, please report a problem" yeah, that's bullshit and a danger sign. Customers shouldn't be expected and aren't being paid to do management's job.

- ***Pro-Tip:* Drive around the back of the store. If it's well kept and organized, good sign. If trash is everywhere and it looks like a junk yard... well move on. Ignore the employees smoking back there, that's a time-honored tradition in the grocery business.**

The Customer Service Office

Next on our tour is the customer service office. These days, the number one thing to look for is staffing. Is someone assigned to the office, or is it empty? Have the people in the office been around for a while, or does the employee look like they started yesterday? The veterans can answer your questions and solve your problems; you probably know more than the rookie. If a store is committed to customer service the office is manned at all times the store is open.

That clerk behind the desk is the air traffic controller in the grocery store. She (almost always a woman because they are smarter and more organized) is answering the phone, dealing with a Karen, selling a lottery ticket to a poor person or a senior, calling "all baggers up front" on the store P.A. system and telling the maintenance guy that "there is a clean-up on aisle 4." If this is going on in the store, you're in a well-managed store.

- ***Pro-Tip:* Call the store sometimes, if the phone is answered by a human being, good sign. If not, danger, danger, Will Robinson.**

Produce

Here is where you truly separate a good store from a bad store. Check out the cut fruit, is it made in store or brought in from the outside? In-store is better as long as they're cutting fresh fruit and not the stuff headed for the garbage bin. Is staffing visible, and are they carrying a knife in a holster on their belt? That's another good sign. Ask a clerk if they have ginger root or parsnips, if they can't answer, or they don't stock it... bad sign. Products shouldn't be piled up to the sky; it damages the merchandise and leads to stale produce. Remember that cucumber beneath the eighty other cucumbers? It will eventually make it to the top of the heap. That's when you'll buy a week-old cuke.

- ***Pro-Tip:* True *Homegrown* and *Organic* produce is rarely found in a typical grocery store. *Homegrown* is too expensive and too logistically difficult to buy direct (try a roadside stand). True *Organic* produce does not display well, and does not hold up long enough. No pesticides and no fertilizer = unattractive and unsellable produce.**

Bakery

Check out the donuts. Do they fry their own every morning or are they coming in from an outside vendor such as *Krispy Kreme*? The donut case should be full-up in the early morning, with full trays coming up behind to take care of the extra demand. By 3:00 p.m. the case should be almost empty, perhaps a stray chocolate Long John or jelly donut are all that's left. That's how you know the bakery only cares about selling fresh donuts.

How many days are they putting on the label of their fresh bread? More than one day means they're willing to sell stale bread.

Do they have cake designers on staff, or do the cakes come from a central plant? The cake designers are the artists in the store. If you are in a good store, the cake designers have been professionally trained, and to them, each cake is a work of art. There should be a photo album of past work on the counter, and the designers will take great pride showing you their portfolio. As they should.

- ***Pro-Tip:* The bakery clerk that waits on you should have some flour or sugar on the apron or uniform. Very good sign!**

Meat/Seafood

Do they cut the meat in-store? Is the hamburger ground in-store or are they selling it in a tube? Since there is no FDA regulation regarding the dating of fresh meat, stores make up their own rules. A general rule is 1-2 days on fresh hamburger and poultry, 3-5 days on beef and pork. If the dates are longer, a bad sign, they are cutting meat too far ahead; hence you are buying old meat. Watch out for too much marinated meat in the case; marinade hides problems. Ring the bell and talk to the butcher. They should be wearing an apron with some blood stains. Ask them the difference between *Prime*, *Choice* and *Select* beef (*Prime* is best, followed by *Choice* and *Select*) and if they think grass-fed beef is better tasting (it's not, fat content gives taste, grass fed beef has less fat).

- ***Pro-Tip:* If the meat department makes it's own bratwurst you're in a good meat department.**

Deli

Believe it or not, in-store deli's are relatively new to supermarkets. Deli's started showing up in supermarkets in the 1950s when a butcher decided to fry up some chicken to sell. In-store delicatessens are now the fastest growing departments in the industry.

A good deli is staffed by folks who know how to cook. The best ones have professional chefs. The clerk might look a little irritated when they wait on you because they want to get back to the cooking. That same look your mom gave you as a kid when you asked her to make you a PBJ while she was in the middle of preparing dinner.

Sandwiches should be made-to-order only and the bread should come from the in-store bakery. There should be plenty of rotisserie chickens at dinner time. The fried chicken should be the best in town. Lunch meat should not be pre-packaged, it should be cut to order, and you should be offered a taste and a sample of the thickness. Someone needs to work in the deli that understands cheese.

- ***Pro-Tip:* Check the potato salad, chicken salad and the tuna salad. If they are made fresh in the store, you're in a real deli. If they come from a manufacturing plant you're not in a deli, you're in a convenience store.**

Traditional Grocery

The aisles should be easy to navigate, not full of floor displays. Shelves should be straight, organized and full. Check out the sell-by dates of slow selling items like canned pumpkin or chutney, if they're in date, you're in a good store.

The dairy should be spotlessly clean, not have the lingering smell of sour milk. Look at the floor underneath the milk section, it should be free of spilled milk. Check out the freezer, is there ice build up on the product in the back? If so, some of the frozen food has thawed and re-frozen.

- ***Pro-Tip:* Has your store been out of a favorite pantry item of yours for a while? Check out the shelf tag where the item used to be. Chances are the shelf has been stocked with the wrong item. Consequently, the order writer is not ordering the correct item because the shelf looks full.**

Front-End

Is there a visible front-end supervisor making sure customers are being waited on properly? What is the ratio of self-serve check lanes to staffed lanes (should be 3-1 staffed lanes)? Do you ever see a new cashier being trained?

Most grocery stores have four kinds of cashiers.

#1. The long time, career cashier (think Alice from *Brady Bunch*) who is accurate and courteous but very, very slow.

#2. The person called up to the cash register from stocking shelves. They really don't want to be there; they have 'real work' to do. This type of cashier will check you out quickly but might forget to take off your coupons.

#3. The high school or college kid in their first job. Usually very good, not burned out yet, and will validate your purchases by making positive comments like they were taught in the customer service class.

#4. You. Who doesn't have a clue as how to ring up produce and will need help.

- ***Pro-Tip:* Whenever possible, check out with the young person who appears to be a high school or college student. These folks have just finished training, have a work ethic, are good at the job, and understand that your time is valuable.**

People

People are the life blood of the store. Here's what I've found in every good supermarket.

- The store manager is visible, and on the floor during busy times. You can see the manager in action, coaching and kidding around with the staff, helping out when it's busy. Good managers know all the employees by name. They also know many customers by name and vice-versa.
- A lot of the staff have been around a long time, they know what they're doing and they seem to like interactions with people.
- There are a lot of young people, working for the first time.
- Department managers take ownership of their departments. If you ask them a question about something they will often answer "in **my** department..."
- Good people attract good people. In well run stores, the staff likes each other, has fun with each other and socialize together. You can feel a good vibe in a well-run store. There are also a lot of family members working at the store. Husband/wife, brother/sister, aunt/uncle.

And drama is a big part of grocery store life. For example:

- There are at least 3-5 "romances" going on between staff members.
- At least 3-5 employees are "pissed off" at the manager because "they are not being scheduled fairly." Other members of the staff are either high or drunk while on the job, and still others are hungover.
- Someone is stealing.
- Most employees, including the store managers, think the corporate office, or the owner, has no clue as to what is going on at store level. (They are usually right.)
- ***Pro-Tip: If you've never seen the manager on the sales floor in your store, you're shopping at the wrong store.***

The supermarket is a place of wonder.

The average store carries over 40,000 items. There are over 300 fresh fruits and vegetables. Fresh meat, milk, eggs, bread, cakes, prepared foods, meals to go, every pantry staple, spices from around the world and every cleaning product imaginable are all available every day. Most stores today have a pharmacy. Some have dry cleaners and banks. Most will deliver your purchases, let you buy on-line, or at the least take your purchases to your car.

However the wonder of the supermarket does not come from the products they sell or the services they offer. The wonder of the supermarket is the people who work there.

Consider:

- Sixty to eighty percent of the food in the store is perishable, meaning it has to be ordered and sold within a week's time. Then unloaded from a truck, prepared, and displayed in a way that is appealing to the eye. By a human being. Every day.
- A department manager's job in a supermarket is like that of a party planner. And there is a party every day with little knowledge of exactly how many guests will show up for the party or what they will want to eat and drink. If the department manager/ party planner orders too much, the extra food ends up in the trash. If they order too little, guests are disappointed and might not come back.
- The store manager and the assistant managers are like circus masters. They must direct a staff and get things done by managing folks from all walks of life with different skill levels, motivation and culture. All in front crowds of customers who are mostly in a hurry and can't wait to complain if something is wrong.
- Supermarket staffers work overnight to stock shelves and go to work early in the morning (around 3:00 am) to fry donuts and unload trucks. They are still at work late at night after most of us have gone to bed. They work weekends, holidays, and through pandemics. Most rarely miss a day.
- Anyone and everyone can walk into a supermarket anytime. No metal detectors, no security, no questions asked. And people wonder why so many shootings happen in the supermarket?

So the next time you go shopping at the supermarket, take a step back, take in the action, then do what I do. Tell that store manager, who's all over the place, that you love their store. Interrupt that service center clerk, who's answering the phone, selling a lottery ticket, and answering that senior citizen's question as to the whereabouts of the canned hams and tell her she's amazing. Thank that front-end supervisor for making the lines move quickly. Compliment the produce clerk, the one with the knife on his belt, on the freshness of his strawberries; the deli clerk that the fried chicken is the best in town. Point out to that meat-cutter, with the bloody apron, that his bratwurst made your last barbecue. Remark to the bakery clerk, with flour on her apron and icing in her hair, that the cake you bought last week was pretty as a picture.

Many years ago, when I was managing a store, I hired an MBA graduate from another industry as a management trainee. After about three weeks, the MBA quit, telling me "you grocery store people are either crazy or noble, I can't figure out which."

After 47 years in the industry, I know. And while I still do not miss the long hours, late nights, crazy customers, unreliable vendors, in-store drama and unreasonable bosses of the grocery business, I do miss the front line people working in the stores.

They are the noble grocers.

###