

Service Still Neglected?

By
**Edward
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I can hardly be accused of being an "average" shopper. First, as a professor of food marketing, I am paid to be abreast of new trends and developments in the food industry. Second, in a past life, I was a professional chef — or at least I pretended to be — and because I still retain an exuberance for creative new uses for food, I actively seek them out while shopping.

And, much to my family's continued amusement, there are few ways I would rather spend a Saturday morning than luxuriating in the aisles of an exciting food store. For these and other reasons, I suppose it would not be unreasonable to expect my understanding and familiarity of supermarket products and practices to be somewhat better than the typical shopper.

Yet, and this is the scary part: despite this superior knowledge that I allegedly possess, I often find supermarket shopping an intimidating experience. Since I was a teenager, supermarkets have doubled in size and in their typical number of departments. Once simply called "grocery stores," they are now more properly referred to as "supermarkets." This reflects an assortment of goods currently carried that is far broader than just dry groceries.

What's more, the number of individual stock keeping units has grown almost tenfold since the 1970s. A generation ago, it was not unusual for the local grocer to know your name and perhaps even some of your product preferences. His staff may have even assisted you in assembling your prepared list. Today, a contemporary superstore with a pharmacy may carry 60,000 SKUs, employ 450 associates and sell plywood and panty hose next to the peaches. Truly, a staggering evolution.

On an intellectual level, I think I understand all this. If pushed, I could probably even cite accepted economic verse to rationalize these developments. But on an emotional level, with my shopping list in hand, I have difficulty coping with this new complexity. In the days when food retailers relied primarily on dry groceries for volume and profits, I too could rely on national brands for quality assurance and consistency. I took solace in knowing that behind the familiar brands, stood Campbell's or Nabisco or General Foods equipped with the latest research laboratories and food specialists. Shopping was easy. Self-service worked just fine.

But, as we all know, those days are gone. Competition and consolidation in the food industry have resulted in food retailers' understanding that differentiation is difficult to achieve with grocery brands alone. Today, facing new competition from supercenters, drugstores and various foodser-

vice hybrids, supermarkets have responded by expanding their emphasis of fresh foods. Already, many leading supermarket operators sell more fresh foods than dry groceries. New choices abound!

Herein lies the rub: whereas many retailers have successfully recognized the new product opportunities in the fresh departments to coincide with consumers' new interests in convenient, tasty and more healthful foods, only a few have

capitalized on the need to provide service to accompany these perishable products. Yet without service in today's fresh departments, I sometimes feel lost. In the grocery aisles, I cruise along confident that the famil-

*Inadequate service can render
a well-stocked deli useless
in the eyes of a customer.*

iar national brands will bring the quality, consistency, nutritional labeling, cooking instructions, packaging protection and toll-free number to call for any additional questions.

But in the other half, the "fresh half" of the store, I feel vulnerable. Where are my familiar brand names? The meat department is awash in a sea of red, with few cooking instructions. Despite an increase in the number of fresh fruits and vegetables, the personnel servicing the department has been cut by nearly half. How can I tell if the pineapple is ripe or what to do with that provocative looking thing with the thorns?

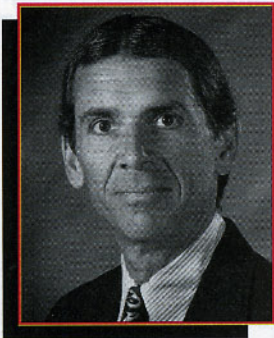
Then I arrive at the deli. While I wait in the long line I ponder: *The case is aplenty with salads but I'm nearly overwhelmed with choices. I wonder, do they really taste good? The entrées and sliced cheeses look, mostly, fresh, but how long have they been sitting there? The shaved meats appear awfully dry, the macaroni and cheese looks pretty crusty on the top. Are these products safe? I'm tempted by those delicious-smelling roasting chickens, but I wonder if that little plastic bag I see is really the most effective package for this high-priced product. The kids would go for the subs, but I better not risk the purchase since they will only eat real mayonnaise. I'd like to ask for a little help, but I doubt that the seemingly uninterested clerk hidden behind the counter would know much ... besides he appears pretty occupied with something else.*

In short, I need help. I need service. I need someone to assure me that the meats have just been cut, that the hummus was made an hour ago, that all sandwiches are made with real mayonnaise. Someone to encourage me to experiment with new entrées and to vouch personally for their merits. I need prompt service that is courteous, knowledgeable and displays the highest personal hygiene standards.

If I need this kind of help, what about your average shopper that patronize your deli?

For many retailers, the product transition has been made; their shoppers are waiting for the service transition to follow.

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