

“I



went down the street to the 24-hour grocery. When I got there, the guy was locking the front door. I said, 'Hey, the sign says you're open 24 hours.' He said, 'Yes, but not in a row.'" - Steven Wright, comedian

Like many of our neighbors around the area, we love Publix supermarkets. Cruising the aisles there recently, I found myself near a fellow shopper, let's call her "Doris," a middle aged woman, who seemed . . . well, perhaps confused. With no prompting from me she stopped and announced to no one in particular, "I don't know where I am or what I'm looking for. Don't mind me." It was easy for me to relate to her, if for no other reason than having gone into a room at home countless times and then wondered why I went in there. Coming out with *something* helps a bit, but I'm left wondering about the original purpose of the trip. Back where I started, the original reason usually comes back to me in a flash. And it's off to the room again, just don't bet the farm that I'll actually make the return trip with mission accomplished. Doris, I hear you.

Maybe she was just momentarily overwhelmed by all the choices available, the specials, the items she really needed (where's my darned list?) versus those that looked like a good idea anyway. Large grocery stores are in some ways a world unto themselves these days, it seems. I was reminded of this the other night when a TV news feature explored bodegas in New York City. You know, those very small neighborhood markets (convenience stores, really) with highly creative if not oddball ways of arranging and displaying their limited wares. Maybe Doris would have an easier time navigating a bodega, if we had any nearby, that is (do we?).

Yep, sprawling grocery stores can be daunting if dazzling. With images of those baby bodegas

Food For Thought

Written by Jack Sparacino

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in the back of my mind, I tried to digest some interesting facts about the grocery business. Food for thought the next time you feel like Doris or seem to be surrounded by them (this includes guys with the thousand-yard stares while holding a hand basket or whatever you call those little things you carry around until they get too heavy and you need to trade up to a cart which many guys seem to resist the way they avoid asking for directions).

1. Some gross business statistics per the Food Market Institute: there are roughly 38,000 grocery stores in the U.S. with annual sales (each) in excess of \$2M. They employ about 3.4M employees and did about \$649B in total sales in 2015. The average number of items carried is nearly 40,000. No sweat, Doris, you only need maybe 20 this time.

The average shopping trip spans [41 minutes](#) . Multiplied by the 1.5-trip per week average, you get over 53 hours per year in the grocery store. A little over two days, let's say.

1. Saturdays are the biggest days for grocery shoppers. You'll be joined by about [41 million Americans](#) nationwide.

2. No surprise, if you don't like the biggest crowds during the week, avoid 4-5 pm. Highest traffic on weekends occurs shortly before noon.

3. Yes, you can buy food all over, including gourmet shops and drugstores, but the vast majority (83%) of shoppers use traditional supermarkets as their primary source of supply for edibles (we're excluding other miscellany like paper towels and laundry detergent).

4. Shopping without a list is asking for trouble in many cases. Trouble as in forgetting something you really needed or buying a bunch of things you didn't really need or want. Women are better at this than men, as 69% report that they make a list versus barely half (52%) for men. Make a note of that. Maybe write it down twice and call it a list.

5. Coupons are usually a good idea, and again women are smarter shoppers than men as 57% use them compared to only 41% of men.

6. Americans are hugely fortunate in needing only 5.6% of their disposable income for grocery purchases. They spend nearly as much (4.3%) of this income dining in restaurants. Compare that to 15% in South Korea, 25% in Mexico, 43% in Pakistan, and 46% in Egypt. The U.S. is at the bottom in this comparison.

7. Of the 38,000 supermarkets in the U.S., 70% are conventional groceries. The remaining 30%? Supercenters, gourmet stores, warehouse clubs like Costco, and military commissaries.

8. On an average day, [32 million Americans](#) hit a grocery store. That equates to 1 in 7 adults shopping at a time. No wonder parking can be a challenge sometimes.

9. The weekly shopping bill for "primary spenders of multi-person households" averages \$118. Single shoppers spend about half that.

10. Women take three more minutes shopping than men, 42 minutes vs. 39. In the speed

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department, shoppers over 30 spend about 10% less time shopping than those under 30. The difference is again small, about 3 minutes.

11. Let's talk nutrition for a moment. The largest portion of shoppers' budgets are spent in the middle aisles on processed foods and sweets.

12. With more and more shoppers concerned about processed foods and potentially avoiding them, some customers, about 25%, lean toward organic versions of their favorite items. Despite the higher costs, they look specifically for foods grown or sourced locally.

Back to Doris and the human side of grocery shopping. Some people clearly enjoy it while for many others it is a chore and sometimes stressful, for example if they are strapped for funds or towing several unruly kids around or just not feeling well (perhaps they just got laid off or their alma mater just lost a crucial game or they just ran into Doris and forgot her name after she very kindly and nicely remembered theirs). I sometimes wonder about the shopper with a cart loaded with only 3-4 items but in great bulk, like eight six-packs, endless rolls of toilet paper and a giant load of Pepto-Bismol and strawberry yogurt. Can they be having any fun? Is somebody sick or about to be? Is there a party brewing?

Some folks look pretty scientific as they roll around. Smart phone in one hand, list in the other, a pen behind their ear, specials flyer in the cart. For every one of these, there seem to be 4 or 5 Doris's. And 1-2 who seem completely fogged in, staring a hole in the pickle shelves as if the fate of the western world hung in the balance. Dill or gherkin or bread and butter or . . . Hoe-lee-moe-lee.

So why do we like Publix? Well, the food selection is great and the employees are frankly terrific, always ready with a smile and a hello and asking if I'm finding everything. Even if that's all canned (jarred?), it's okay. They are there to keep you out of a pickle (any kind, I think), out of a jam, out of the soup. Keep you from going nuts. And I do not believe they're milking you for a gigantic thank you. Nor can they accept tips though (shhhh!) I have found a way around that, nice old guy in the electric cart who at least usually avoids crashing into stuff.

On the way home, I always stop somewhere to feed the "stray" cats, as one of the checkout ladies called them the other day. Something to look forward to, no matter what Washington food fights await me on the evening news.