

Diatribes 176

Self Servicing and Self-charging Supermarkets.

It isn't exactly rocket science, nor is it exactly novel. The owners of supermarkets have discovered, if discovered is the word, that having ripped off the suppliers and the customers it was about time to get the customers themselves to do the ripping-off. They are therefore increasingly using self-charging check-outs.

Supermarkets are around 70 years old. Before the supermarket we had the shopping strip, which still exists in many local shopping centres, and which in many middle class areas is getting a new lease of life. These strips had more than walk-in shops. Many were centres of delivery services; you could get deliveries of bread, milk, groceries, meat and, before the advent of domestic refrigerators, ice. There were deliveries of fuels such as coal and firewood. If you had to go out you left your order with the money, if you had it; otherwise tradespeople would give you credit. Of all these services only the newspaper delivery remains.

I am not here talking about an ideal society. Its main advantage was that it represented a community. As I mentioned, within limits tradespeople gave you credit. Would to-day's supermarkets give you credit if you fell on hard times? Not on your sweet Nellie. If you happen to leave your purse at home, there is nothing for it but to drive home and get it, and the same goes for your credit card. A depression like that of the 1930s will be a calamity much worse than that one was. I say will be advisably, because it is only a matter of time before it is here.

The supermarket is not simply a cheaper way of shopping. for its customers. It is a highly scientific and highly researched rip-off. Even before you enter its doors, you are in thrall to its methods. They start with the location. Almost always the supermarket has the closest spot nearest the car park, which not only aids in attracting customers but minimises the cost of retrieving trolleys. What is more, for this favourable position the supermarket pays less rent per square metre than other shopping centre occupiers. This is based on the concept that it is the supermarket which attracts the shoppers – in itself a highly questionable assumption. And if it's the supermarket which forms the attraction, why does it need preferential rent treatment?

The far from level playing field doesn't end there. The large purchasing power of the supermarket allows it to exert enormous financial and political pressures on its suppliers. This ranges from discounts on goods as well as forcing, in effect, suppliers to send in their own staff to replenish supermarket shelves and arrange shelf disposition. Apart from all this, the position of classes of goods can be and is manipulated to force customers and, in particular, customers' children to go past items of particular attraction to get to essentials. Other tricks include selling essentials at zero or negative margins to disadvantage local convenience stores. The political effects are characterised by successful campaigns to introduce 24-hour shopping as well as a string of local council concessions.

The net effect of all this has been that in Australia on average some ¾ of all day-to-day consumption items are sold through a handful of supermarket chains which handle every conceivable class of goods from clothing to computer consumables.

And while recent electricity failures destroyed vast amounts of perishable goods in small food shops, supermarkets can afford stand-by power plants to keep their refrigerators, lights and air-conditioners going.

What part does high technology play in this supermarket bonanza? While it may not have been very important 70 years ago when supermarkets first started, to-day they rely on technology totally. Where once each item had to be individually marked with a pricing gun, we now have bar codes which price each item as it passes the check-out.

Prices can be changed at a moment's notice not only store wide but presumably nation-wide or even world-wide. All that needs changing in the store is the label on the shelf, which is printed out as part of the change procedure.

No wonder it is now possible to sell fruit and vegies in supermarkets despite the extra time taken up by weighing and looking up the price, and even use check-out staff to act as bank-tellers to handle card-based transactions. These latter are of course subsidised by banks which are hell-bent to reduce their own counter-staff.

That's what it is all about – getting rid of people off the books. Any day now I expect fruit and vegies to be sprayed with an odour that can be checked by some pricing machine. If only they could buy a robot shop-assistant!

This gets me back to the subject I raised at the beginning of this diatribe. Self-charging. We have had it in our libraries for years. If every item is bar-coded, why not get customers or clients to swipe their own items? In the library it hasn't exactly been a roaring success, because people like to exchange a few words with an assistant who, after all, despite the bosses' wishes, is still a human being. All the problems with supermarket self charging must have been solved because in other countries they have introduced it some time ago.

In an article in the Melbourne *AGE* the proponents of self-charging wish to dissociate themselves from our well-founded suspicion that it is all about super-profits. Unfortunately they are not forthcoming on what it is about. Their feeble explanation is that self-charging will speed our way through the check-out. What utter bull-shit. Check-out staff are usually younger than customers, more nimble, and this is important, more highly skilled in the job. Again we have the bosses conviction that their workers have no skills and can be replaced in an instant by the same little old lady whom they held up to ridicule only a moment ago. The proposed system can only be done by a massive increase of pre-packaging regardless of the environmental problem this will cause. This means that whatever labour is saved at the checkout will have to be spent preparing packages as is already done with meat.

As an engineer who had quite a bit of experience with automatic processes I have news for the super-market bosses. Serving a customer is not just about swiping goods past the bar-code reader. First of all you have to pick up the item and orient it so that the bar-code faces the light-source. Think of how often a skilled check out operator misses the reader the first time through, or even the second or third time. How is the little old lady going to handle a 2kg packet of flour or dog-food past the reader? The people who want the new technology tell us it will be quicker, but I doubt it. I also think that there will have to be an operator standing by to help those who have trouble with the technology. Finally, far from saving time there will have to be more rather than fewer check-outs. The final effect will be the reverse of what is projected.

How do I know all this? Easy. This system was possible many years ago. It didn't happen, because it doesn't work anywhere near as well as the bosses think it will. First of all they have to persuade all their customers to pay for all their goods by credit card as it isn't likely that the machine will be able to deal satisfactorily with change.

That's where we come in. When you get to one of these rip-off zones, don't go along with it. Protest. Use the check-out which still has a human operator. If it has an excessively long queue protest to the management. Above all, if your shopping centre has a butcher, a greengrocer, a stationer or a florist give them the business, even if it costs marginally more (it rarely does). If you have to shop at the super-market, talk to the assistant and tell them how we appreciate their presence behind the counter. This is one technology we can beat.