

# **Retail Food Store Employee Influence on Customer Shopping Behavior**

by

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## **Preface**

This report represents one in a series being developed by the author on the topic of employee helpfulness. Additional work has been done in Fort Collins dealing with helpfulness in retail food stores as well as restaurants. A comparative project has been conducted by Dr. John Snyder in Australia which will facilitate international comparison of the perception of helpfulness.

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## **Abstract**

Retail food store employees presumably improve the level of satisfaction customers realize during a shopping trip. A review of the literature revealed few significant contributions supporting or refuting this contention.

A telephone survey of 505 households in Fort Collins, CO. during the Fall of 1988 was conducted to generate information on retail food store employees helpfulness. The findings revealed little explicit impact of helpfulness. Statistical analysis determined a number of relationships between dollars spent in a store and the perceived level of employee helpfulness.

Retail food stores were not selected, patronized nor avoided based exclusively nor extensively on perceptions of employee helpful-

ness. On the other hand, employees were considered necessary for an enjoyable shopping trip.

Employees are neither change agents in retail food stores nor are they apparently significant stress inducers or inhibitors compared to the potential stress realized by an inconvenient location, high prices or a poor variety of products.

It is recommended that employees be more closely associated with obvious service strategies, and that services be made more obvious and predominant in the promotion and advertising of the retail food store.

## **Prologue**

In a sense, buying actions are always actions of self-expression in that they embody the consumer's own goals and wants and express how consumers define themselves."

(O'Shaughnessy 1987)

## **Introduction**

Retail food store experiences are encountered by most consumers on a regularly scheduled basis. Food shopping for the majority of consumers is a regular procedure; is in effect customary; and for some can be said to be prescribed by one or more environmental, marital and physiological situations (namely hunger).

Retail food stores are staffed by persons who may or may not confront the shopper; some to provide service, others to provide convenience, and other to finalize the transaction (namely the

checkers). The confrontation between employee and shopper may be constructive or destructive during any one of the shopping trips.

As Park, Iyer and Smith (1989) state,

Unlike most consumer buying contexts, the grocery shopping experience is characterized by (1) multiple buying goals that must be achieved through the processing of a complex array of in-store stimuli such as products, brands, and point-of-purchase information, and (2) repetition at regular time intervals (e.g., once a week). These conditions create a unique context in which purchase intentions and outcomes often differ depending on a variety of situational factors.

The previous quote as well as other reported research results raise several questions concerning the perceived impact of employee helpfulness on shopper behavior. To what extent is employee helpfulness a goal for management to achieve? To what extent do employees stimulate shopper satisfaction and prolong patronage of a store? To what extent is employee helpfulness one of the cognitive situational factors creating the context of a satisfactory or frustrating shopping experience?

A review of numerous retailing and consumer research publications released over the past several years reflects a passive attitude toward an examination of the influence that employees have on consumer and shopper behaviors and attitudes toward retail food stores.

It is an initial assumption that human resources employed by a retail food store facilitate or retard the exchange of value between customers and the store. It is generally assumed that both the management and non-management employees influence the marketing ability of the store and influence the purchasing ability and willingness of the customer. It is also assumed that influence is accomplished through verbal and non-verbal communications; upon request by customers and or voluntarily by the food store employee (i.e., customer service).

### Situation and Research Problem

The continued shopping in a retail food store is contingent upon a series of factors being satisfactory to the food purchasing agent of the household. The Burgoyne study (1981) presented a lengthy list of factors influencing consumer

selection of a retail food store (Table 1). The Burgoyne study asked the respondents to rank the importance of "courteous and helpful employees." This factor ranked seventh with an average rating of 7.57 on a scale of 9. No mention was made of which employees, what department of the store nor the specific role of employees in creating a satisfactory environment for shoppers.

**Table 1**

The average importance ratings of factors considered when selecting a supermarket

Store Characteristic	Weighted Average Rating <sup>1</sup>
Quality and freshness of meat	8.10
Quality and freshness of produce	8.09
Attractiveness and cleanliness	7.97
Overall prices	7.78
Variety and selection	7.77
Convenient location	7.69
Courteous and helpful employees	7.57
Prices of meats	7.36
Prices of produce	7.35
Good parking facilities	7.15
Fast checkout service	7.09
Good store arrangement	7.04
Advertised specials	6.30

<sup>1</sup>Based on a scale of 1-9; 9 = the most important.

SOURCE: Burgoyne Study (1981)

*Progressive Grocer* (1989) annually publishes its scores and ratings of characteristics on which consumers base their choice of a supermarket. The highest ranking that "employees" other than checkers received was 15th with a score of 83.6, with 48 percent of the respondents rating "helpful personnel in service departments" as an extremely important characteristic in choosing a supermarket (Table 2). A "friendly manager" and "knowing customers names" were ranked 28th and 42nd respectively.

**Table 2**

Factors looked for by consumers when choosing a supermarket, as reported by *Progressive Grocer*, April 1989.

Rank	Characteristic	Score	Percent Rating "Extremely Important"
1	Cleanliness	93.9	75
2	All prices labeled	93.7	78
3	Low prices	91.7	74
4	Accurate, pleasant checkout clerks	90.5	66
5	Freshness date marked on products	89.3	66
6	Good produce dept.	88.1	62
13	Does not run short of items on "special"	83.9	54
14	Unit pricing signs on shelves	83.9	56
15	Helpful personnel in service departments	83.6	48
	• Ranked 12th in 1987;		
	• Ranked 14th in 1988		
28	Manager is friendly and helpful	67.6	35
	• Ranked 29th in 1987;		
	• Ranked 28th in 1988		
42	Store personnel know customers' names	28.7	6
	• Ranked 41st in 1987;		
	• Ranked 43rd in 1988		

SOURCE: *Progressive Grocer* (April 1989)

Hansen and Deutscher (1977) also discussed the attributes of retail food stores important to consumers. Helpful store personnel ranked 8th with an average importance rating of 8.88 (Table 3).

**Table 3**

Top ten and bottom five store attributes Important to consumers In the selection of a retail food store

Store Attribute	Rank	Mean Importance Rating
Dependable products	1	9.50
Store is clean	2	9.33
Easy to find items you want	3	9.27
Fast checkout	4	9.23
High-quality products	5	9.10
High value for the money	6	9.05
Fully stocked	7	8.94
Helpful store personnel	8	8.88
Easy to move through store	9	8.88
Adequate number of store personnel	10	8.87
Many friends shop there	37	4.18
Store is liked by friends	38	4.07
Easy to get credit	39	2.58
Layaway available	40	2.09
Easy to get home delivery	41	1.93

Source: R. Hansen and T. Deutscher (1977)

Retail food store employees and managers are visible resources in a retail food store. They act and react as stimulated or motivated by customers, managers, other employees, and by the work environment. Are employee actions or reactions a source of frustration or satisfaction to customers? Are experiences, or the lack of same, with store employees a source of motivation or distraction to customers in a retail food store?

The situation faced by retail food store management involves hiring and training store personnel in an effort to achieve store goals and objectives. One assumed goal is profitability. Can customer dollar purchases be influenced or associated with perceptions of, and experiences with employees? Is store loyalty a function of in-store behavior of employees?

**Previous Research**

Research into the customer selection of a food store reflects the relative unimportance of employee "helpfulness" and "service." Do these

terms adequately describe what is expected of employees and management? What other dimensions of employee and management attitude and behavior should be considered?

Research on retail food store customer behavior has focused primarily on product-consumer interactions such as the effect of display width (Harris 1958), and new counter displays (McClure and West 1969), and point of purchase displays (Dickson and Sawyer 1986). Other authors have explored the following:

Brucks, 1985	Effect of product class knowledge
Cox, 1964	Response to shelf-space
Hayer, 1984	Effects of repeat purchasing
Kollat & Willett, 1967	Impulse purchasing
Pork, Iyer & Smith, 1989	Effects of situational in-store factors
Stephenson, 1969	Determinants of patronage
Farley, 1968	Dimensions of choice patterns
Jacoby, Chestnut & Fisher 1976	Information acquisition
Monroe & Guillinan, 1975	Retail patronage influence
Louviere & Garth, 1987	Determinants of retail facility choice
Golden & Albaum, 1987	Retail image measurement
Tantiwong & Wilton, 1985	Elderly food store preferences
Hawkins, Coney & Best	Consumer behavior
Hornik, 1984	Perception of time in consumer behavior
Keng & Ehrenberg, 1984	Patterns of store choice
Andreasen, 1984	Changes in consumer preferences
Korgconkar, Lund & Price, 1985	Attitude and patronage behavior

The results of the Monroe and Guillinan (1975) paper "offer some substantive findings about the nature of relationships among some key variables believed to influence retail patronage behavior." The influence of store employees was not explored nor considered.

Numerous examples plus most of the references listed previously do not consider employee impact or influence on customer shopping behaviors.

### **This Study's Significance**

This study differs from previous research in several fundamental ways:

First, it considers the association of perceived employee helpfulness on the shopping duration of consumers and the dollars spent by consumers.

Second it limits consideration to present behaviors associated with post-store selection, namely, present shopping experiences, not initial store selection.

### **Management's Goal**

It is assumed that store management strives to develop a retail food store marketing plan based on a valid analysis of the relationship of human resource impact and customer loyalty. More specifically, it is assumed that management strives to accomplish several objectives.

### **Management's Objectives**

More specifically, this study is predicated on several assumed management objectives. These objectives are the basis for the research objectives that follow.

The management objectives assumed are:

- a) To improve the situational relationships between human resources and customers.
- b) To implement the appropriate marketing strategies in order to improve store loyalty through employee helpfulness, and
- c) To effectively follow-up and evaluate the marketing plan and its human resource deployment strategies.

Several alternative accomplishments desired as a result of working toward the major management goal can be described as:

- a) To increase effectiveness of human resources in order to improve store loyalty.
- b) To improve the hiring of the appropriately effective employees for maintaining and or improving customer loyalty.
- c) To improve training and retraining of store employees to achieve customer loyalty.

## Research Goal

The primary research goal to which this research project contributes is that of determining the perceived relationships between employee helpfulness and retail food store customer satisfaction, store loyalty, dollar expenditures and other descriptive characteristics of the customer.

## Research Objectives

The analysis presented in this report was based on the following research objectives:

- a) To determine the number of purchase occasions and dollars expended consistently at retail food stores during a "past month" period of time.
- b) To determine the descriptive socio-economic and psychographic characteristics of customers.
- c) To determine the relative importance of employee characteristics associated with patronage characteristics of food store customers.
- d) To determine the personality, professional and food marketing skill areas of an employee important to the customer in the continued patronage of a retail food store.
- e) To determine the direction and intensity of attitudes of customers toward employees.
- f) To determine apparent education and training resources and programs needed to improve and/or maintain positive attitudes toward employees.
- g) To determine the perceived level of employee helpfulness associated with retail food stores shopped most frequently.

This study seeks to fulfill four secondary research objectives 1) to motivate the use of "helpfulness" as a segmentation strategy in retail food marketing, 2) to review the conspicuous literature on employee "helpfulness," 3) to replicate findings from previous research involving relationships between helpfulness and retail food store customer patronage behavior, and 4) to extend the scope of previous research in the determination of retail patronage loyalty.

## Methodology

### *Design*

The results of this project were based primarily on a random sample of 505 households and secondarily on a second random sample of 635 households. A telephone survey was conducted in the Spring and Fall of 1988 in Fort Collins, Colorado.

The frame consisted of all households listed in the Fort Collins, Colorado telephone directory. The random samples were systematically drawn from the directory based on random page and column selection.

The survey subjects were persons in the household with the primary food procurement responsibility.

### *Presumptions*

The presumed situations on which this study was based are that market planning (strategic as well as tactical), sales volume and profitability depend on a favorable relationship between retail food store employees and the household purchasing representative, namely the store patron.

The behaviors, present and immediate past, recallable by the household respondent, as well as present attitudes and opinions represent the dependent and independent variables in this project.

The independent variable, employee helpfulness was defined by the consumer and the resulting perception of helpfulness was rated on a scale of 0 to 10.

The respondents were asked to recall their retail food store shopping experiences during the past four weeks, including store shopped, frequency of shopping trips, the duration in years they had shopped in each store, dollar expenditures, and expressions of preferences, satisfactions and frustrations resulting from the shopping experience.

There was no distinction made between in-store decisions and external store decisions. It was assumed that dollars expended and the frequency and duration of patronage were manifestations of both decision making locations.

### *Helpfulness Defined*

The "helpfulness rating" is an ordinal measure of the customer's perception of helpfulness of the food store's employees with which they interface during the shopping trip. No attempt was made to define or suggest a definition of the term helpfulness. It was assumed that the customer's definition was one which included the concept of making things easier or better for the customer or a feeling of assistance in avoiding of a shopping mistake.

It is realized that the construct of helpfulness as defined above does not lend itself to positive actions by management compared to an explicit set of more specific operational definitional characteristics. The analysis was based on consumer self-definition of helpfulness.

To a limited extent, it is assumed that "helpfulness" is an alternative store offering; at least an implied implicit store offering.

The ordinal numerical rating scale used was 0 to 10. The rating was the subject's own rating or perceived value of the helpfulness in general of store employees.

*Helpfulness is an Attitude*

Attitude is basic to action. Attitude is a variable that intervenes between awareness and action - store familiarity and customer patronage.

A positive consumer attitude is considered necessary in order to realize the benefits of marketing strategies.

The findings of Korgaonkas, Lund and Price (1985) "suggest that retailers interested in increasing store patronage could benefit by taking actions aimed at developing a positive attitude toward their stores."

The helpfulness rating is assumed to reflect a positive or negative attitude toward the store.

**Research Findings**

*Descriptions and Profiles*

The primary data source was a sample of 505 randomly selected households from one medium size city in the Rocky Mountain region.

The mean or modal descriptive profile of the household sample can be summarized as follows:

Demographic Profile

- Average Annual Family Income \$28,700
- Average Household Size 2.66 persons
- Predominant Occupation Student
- Average Respondent Age 36.9 years
- Sex Classification 65.9 percent Female

Patronage Characteristics

Monthly Retail	
Food Expenditure . . . . .	\$222.00
Duration of Patronage	
(years) . . . . .	6.88 years
Frequency of Monthly Food	
Shopping Trips . . . . .	8.17 trips
Number of Food Stores	
Shopped . . . . .	2 stores
Number of Food Chains	
Shopped . . . . .	1.9 chains

*Helpfulness Rated*

Helpfulness, as self-defined by the survey respondents, was rated at an overall level of 7.94 on a scale of 0 to 10. On a scale of one to one hundred, this would represent a 72.2 rating.

The weighted average rating of the stores most intensely shopped by the respondents was an 8.21 while the secondary stores were rated at a 7.68. Some of these secondary stores were considered as substitute stores as well as complementary stores.

Overall Rating . . . . .	7.94
Primary Store Rating . . . . .	8.21
Secondary Store Rating . . . . .	7.68

*Helpfulness Rating and Store Characteristics*

The survey respondents rated the helpfulness of locally owned, independent retail food stores substantially higher than other regional or national chain stores (Table 4). On the other hand, even if locally owned, medium to small retail food stores were rated the lowest in helpfulness.

The highest rated store (by a very small margin) was the local food coop while the lowest rated store was a national chain store (Table 5).

The highest rated supermarket was a locally owned store with a significantly greater share of food store dollar sales, realized more shopping trips and was located out of the downtown area, with a clientele reporting an above average household income (Table 6).

This store along with its companion store located downtown, were rated the highest of all supermarkets. Importantly, both of these stores provided a service meat counter and grocery carry out for all shoppers. They realized a market share of sales dollars in excess of 24 percent, and had a patronage base reporting an average household income of \$26,500 and \$29,800 respec-

tively compared to the overall average of \$26,400 for all the survey respondent households.

**Table 4**

The weighted average helpfulness rating of four retail food store sub-classifications by size of store and type of ownership, 12 Fort Collins, CO, retail food stores, 1988.

Weighted Average Rating	Store Subclassification
7.56	Medium or small size (square feet and sales)
7.61	National or regional chain supermarkets
7.96	Supermarket size stores (square feet and sales)
8.60	Local, independently owned, supermarkets, medium and small stores

*Statistical Relationships*

The helpfulness rating was positively and significantly related to dollar purchases by households in four store situations (Table 7). Four significant positive correlations emerged from the analysis at the .039 level or above. Customer dollar purchases were positively and significantly related to the two newest stores in the community and the two locally owned supermarkets which received the highest helpfulness ratings and which offered service meat counters and grocery carry-out for all customers.

The analysis of the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents also produced several significant correlations with the helpfulness rating (Table 8).

In five situations, as age increased so did the helpfulness rating. Stores 040, 041 and 042 received the highest helpfulness ratings and are in locations or situations appealing to the middle to upper age people. These stores are locally owned as is store 030. Store 038, with a negative correlation value, is a store serving many university students. As age increased, the helpfulness rating decreased reflecting an apparent

perceived higher helpfulness level for students and lower for non-students.

Income was both positively and negatively correlated with the helpfulness rating. The two stores with negative correlations reflected stores highly affected by student populations: as income increased, ratings were lower; conversely, as incomes decreased, the perception of helpfulness was significantly higher; i.e. the higher income non-student households perceive lower levels of helpfulness being provided to them.

Students, elderly and the retired represent occupations significantly related to perceptions of the store helpfulness. Stores 038, 039, 040 and 044 are stores highly affected by students and elderly. These occupations reported significantly higher perceptions of helpfulness in these stores compared to other occupations.

The number of persons in the household and the sex of the household respondent were two demographic characteristics not significantly related to helpfulness.

**Store Complementarity and Substitutability**

Correlations were run between the number of times shopped, dollars spent, and the helpfulness rating among all stores, for all shoppers for each store. The object of this analysis was to determine store complementarity and substitutability and the extent to which store employees influenced this situation as reflected in the rating of helpfulness by customers of all stores.

For an individual household shopper, it was assumed that a significant positive correlation between times shopped and dollars spent represented complementarity. Likewise, it was assumed that a significant negative correlation between the shopping frequency and/or the dollar expenditures between any two stores represented a situation in which the two stores were substitutes for each other.

If significant correlations did exist between two stores, to what extent was the helpfulness rating also significantly related?

There were 91 possible store situation correlations; 19 were significant. Five correlation situations were positive, suggesting complementarity while 14 were negative, suggesting substitutability.

**Table 5**

The contrasting and comparative characteristics of the two retail food stores rated highest and lowest on employee helpfulness, Fort Collins, CO, 1988.

Highest Rated Store Rating=9.00	Lowest Rated Store Rating=6.82	Store Characteristics
Local Cooperative	National Chain Supermarket	Type of store
Near Downtown	Downtown	Location
.19	5.99	Share of dollar sales (percent)
.60	6.40	Share of shopping trips (percent)
6.00	7.60	Average shopping duration of patron (years)
10.00	24.00	Age of store (years)
\$16,250	\$19,800	Average household income

**Table 6**

The contrasting and comparative characteristics of the two retail food supermarkets with the lowest and highest helpfulness rating, Fort Collins, CO, Fall 1988.

Highest Rated Supermarket Rating=8.98	Lowest Rated Supermarket Rating=6.82	Store Characteristics
Locally owned	National Chain	Type of Supermarket
15.13	5.99	Share of dollars Sales (percent)
Suburban	Downtown	Location
11.10	6.40	Share of shopping trips (percent)
15.0	24.0	Age of store (years)
8.50	7.60	Average shopping duration of patron (years)
\$29,800	\$19,800	Average household income
Yes	No	Service meat counter?
Yes	No	Grocery-carry out?

**Table 7**

The significant correlation coefficients resulting from an analysis of the relationships between the helpfulness rating and dollars spent for food by store, by 505 Fort Collins, Colorado, households, Fall 1988.

Store Number	Level of Significance of the Correlation Coefficient
030	.006
036	.030
040	.006
041	.039

The correlation coefficients were generated for significance between each and every store for shopping frequency, dollars spent, employee helpfulness rating and duration of shopping at each store.

Given the "comp" and "sub" situations, the helpfulness rating was significantly correlated with the frequency of shopping and the dollars spent at a "comp" or "sub" store.

Complementary situations existed in 5 store situations. The sales and frequency of shopping were positively correlated. In each instance, the helpfulness rating was also positively correlated.

Conversely, there were 14 situations in which frequency and sales were negatively correlated. At the same time, helpfulness depreciated significantly for those stores with substitutability status.

The findings reflect a related influence of helpfulness. Shoppers made more trips and spent more dollars in secondary or complementary stores in which helpfulness was an influencing factor. Likewise, shoppers spent fewer dollars and made fewer trips to stores in which the helpfulness was perceived to be lower than their regular store. Substitute stores were perceived to have less helpful personnel.

**Store Choice Criteria**

The original decision to shop a food store and the subsequent decision to consistently shop

a food store may not have been based on the same criteria.

In fact, the "decision" to continue and consistently purchase goods and services from a retail food store may not be a "decision" in the deliberative sense of decision making. Evidence: The average survey respondent shopped consistently at the same store for 6.88 years, averaging from 3.3 years for those shopping a new store to over 13.5 years for those shopping an established, locally owned retail food store.

The original decision is assumed to have been based on choice criteria reflecting the consumer's goals, needs and perceptions. The subsequent decision to continue shopping one or more stores is assumed to be based on a rationalization balancing cost, quality, and other factors.

The final store selection is assumed to reflect the consumer's perception of self among other shoppers; quality of products and price levels; and the ability to achieve other goals such as time conserved through familiarity with product location and service location within a store.

Retail food store customers avoid frequent food store selection decisions. The average survey respondent shopped their present supermarket for 6.88 years; which represented 62.3 percent of their Fort Collins residency years (10.6 years). The 6.88 years represented 45.5 percent of the years during which the present food store had been open for business (14.5 years).

The factors which reinforced this consistent shopping of the same store or stores can be hypothesized to be:

- a) Absolute satisfaction with the present store or stores.
- b) Desire to avoid continued re-evaluation of the store, its services and products.
- c) Customer resignation - no other store is any better, or
- d) Any number of other satisfaction or rationalization.

**Reasons for Store Selection**

Customer "convenience" was the most important reason given for retail food store selection; including convenience in general (24.6%) and the convenience of location (22.4%) (Table 9).

**Table 8**

The significant correlation coefficients resulting from an analysis of the relationships between the helpfulness rating and the demographic characteristics of age, number of family members, income, sex, and occupations, by store, by 505 Fort Collins, CO, households, Fall 1988.

Store Number	Level of Significance of the Correlation Coefficients for				
	Age	Persons	Income	Sex	Occupation
030	.000		.000		
031			-.001		
036			.000	.006	
038	-.001		-.000		.004
039					.000
040	.000				.002
041	.001	.001	.000		.017
042	.006				
044					.008

Retail store personnel were mentioned by 7.7 percent of the 505 respondents as an important factor in store selection.

The analysis involved three questions asked of all survey respondents relating to factors influencing shopping behavior. Assuming each respondent had directly mentioned "employees" as a factor, there was a potential for 1,515 (505x3) employee related responses. In total, employees were specifically mentioned 121 times for a "mention" rate of 7.99 percent. In comparison, convenience and inconvenience were terms with a mention rate of 31.9 percent.

#### Sources of Satisfaction

The most significant sources of shopping satisfaction expressed by the retail food store shoppers were the store products (25.1%) and the ease and convenience of checking out of the store (24%) (Table 10).

Store employees (personnel) were mentioned by 14 percent of the respondents as sources of satisfaction. Previous research determined that the majority of respondents considered the checker as a source of satisfaction rather than any other position.

**Table 9**

The most important reasons for shopping the present retail food store, and the percent of survey respondents expressing each reason, Fort Collins, CO, Fall 1988.

Reason	Percent of Respondents
Convenience	54.9
Level of prices	29.9
Products in general	12.7
Familiarity and comfort	9.3
Personnel	7.7
Cleanliness and appearance	7.0
Services	3.6
Meat department	4.0
Produce department	2.8
All others	11.3

The primary reasons customers referred to employees as a source of shopping satisfaction involved friendliness and pleasantness (Table 11). Knowledge of the store by employees ranked third and was mentioned by 17.2 percent of those referring to employees as a source of shopping satisfaction.

**Table 10**

The most significant sources of customer satisfaction reported by shoppers and percent responding, 505 Fort Collins, CO, households, Fall 1988.

<u>Source of Satisfaction</u>	<u>Percent of Respondents</u>
Products in general	25.1
Check-out characteristics	24.0
Convenience	16.0
Personnel	14.1
Level of prices	13.5
Familiarity and comfort	6.2
Produce department	6.0
Services	4.8
Cleanliness and appearance	4.2
Meat department	3.6
Miscellaneous Sources	18.0

**Table 11**

The characteristics of store personnel referred to as sources of employee satisfaction, 505 households, Fort Collins, CO, Fall 1988.

<u>Employee Characteristics</u>	<u>Percent of Respondents</u>
Friendly and pleasant, etc.	45.0
Helpful and service oriented	28.0
Knowledge of the store	17.2

(In reference to Table 10)

**Sources of Frustration**

Store employees were not referred to as highly significant sources of shopping satisfaction. On the other hand the employees were ranked even lower, 7th, as a source of frustration--mentioned by 2.6 percent of the respondents (Table 12).

The employee characteristics most influencing perceptions of dissatisfaction were unfriendliness, rudeness, and lack of familiarity with the store (Table 13).

**Store Avoidance Criteria**

The reasons given for avoiding a retail food store reinforced the lack of influence of store employees. Ninety-five percent of the respond-

ents provided reasons for avoiding a store and 3.40 percent of the respondents mentioned store personnel (Table 14). The average helpfulness rating of those stores not shopped by respondents was 6.7; and 24.9 percent could not (or would not) rate the helpfulness of employees of a store in which they had not shopped.

**Do Shoppers Want Employee Help?**

A modified Thurstone Scale, involving five statements, was used to generate a continuum of perceived acceptance of employee contact and assistance (Table 15).

The responses to the five statements strongly endorsed retail food store employee assistance. Employee contact with customers should not be prohibited and contact was not perceived as shopping interference. Conversely, employee assistance was helpful in the job of shopping and 68 percent of the respondents reported that employee assistance was the most important service that a shopper could receive.

**Table 12**

The sources of retail food store shopping frustrations, and percent responding, 505 Fort Collins, CO, households, Fall 1988.

<u>Source of Frustration</u>	<u>Percent of Respondents</u>
Check out characteristics	30.3
Inconvenience	24.8
Products in general	15.0
Level of prices	4.2
Cleanliness and appearance	3.0
Produce	2.6
Personnel	2.6
Meat department	2.0
Familiarity and comfort	1.2
Services	1.0
All Others	15.8

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**Table 13**

The characteristics of store personnel referred to as sources of employee caused frustrations, 505 Fort Collins, CO, households, Fall 1988.

<u>Source of Frustration</u>	<u>Percent of Respondents</u>
Unfriendly, rude, poor attitude, etc.	29.0
Employee unfamiliar with store	15.8
Ignore customers	9.0
Not helpful	9.0

(In reference to Table 12)

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**Table 14**

Reasons for not shopping in a retail food store, 505 Fort Collins, CO, households, Fall 1988.

<u>Avoidance Criteria</u>	<u>Percent of Respondents</u>
Inconvenience	57.2
High level of prices	21.2
Lack of familiarity and comfort	13.3
Lack of cleanliness and appearance	7.9
Products in general	3.8
Personnel	3.4
Check out characteristics	2.8
Services	1.8
Meat Department	1.8
Produce Department	1.4
All other	8.1

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## Summary and Conclusions

### *Shopping by the Rules*

To paraphrase O'Shaughnessy (1987) in his discussion of adaptive behavior, he states that "the consumer acts as if employing one or more rules."

Were the rules "employed" by the survey respondents? Were any of the rules implied? In summarizing this research report, the following discussion explores the extent to which results

conform to several "rules" to which consumers are reportedly adhering.

Rule 1. Consumers "follow what others do, who are known to be knowledgeable."

This "imitation" rule was manifested in several ways. The dependence by consumers on store employees as "others known to be knowledgeable" was not reflected in the "reasons," "satisfactions" nor "frustrations" expressed by the respondents.

Likewise, the "following" of neighbors, friends or relatives was not explicitly important. The data reflect little overt expression of "followership."

The "imitation" concept or rule was implied in the duration that respondents continuously shopped the same store- i.e., the repeated reinforcement of the original store selection decision.

"Self-imitation" was implied and demonstrated in the data. The duration of shopping at the same store implied a means of avoiding a decision and shopping errors. The duration simply implied the successful relationship between the store and consumer.

Roselius (1971) would explain store loyalty as the continued shopping at a retail food store based on the grounds that collective judgement is unlikely to lead to serious error.

Rule 2. Consumers "turn to people they can trust."

There was little evidence to imply that store employees were either trusted or mistrusted. Likewise, other than checkers, few other types of store employees were or would be complimented for their helpfulness. This can be explained in part by the fact that food items are in many instances not complex products; many brands are not totally nor significantly different in many or any respects; and few food products are socially visible at the point of consumption, i.e. baked potato does not carry a brand.

Neither did survey respondents report on the importance of the approval of others of the food store in which they shop. The approval of others as a criteria for continuous food store use was not substantiated by the research data. Other criteria were more significant in influencing the loyalty of food store consumers.

**Table 15**

The degree to which retail food store employee assistance is perceived as helpful in the shopping activity, 505 Fort Collins, Colorado, households, Fall 1988.

<u>Statement regarding Employee Assistance</u>	<u>Percent Agreeing</u>	<u>Percent Disagreeing</u>	<u>Weighted Average<sup>a</sup></u>
A. All supermarket employee contact with customers should be prohibited.	1	96	1.55
B. Offers of shopping assistance by supermarket employees interferes with the shopping trip.	11	77	2.17
C. I have no feeling one way or another about supermarket employee assistance.	10	77	2.21
D. Supermarket employee assistance helps me to do a better job of shopping.	71	11	3.72
E. Supermarket employee assistance is the most important service that a shopper can receive.	68	13	3.68

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(a) The weighted average was based on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 equal to "strongly agree" and 1 equal to strongly disagree.

Rule 3. Consumers "Keep to firms or brands they can trust."

Familiarity was explicitly and implicitly stated as a patronage reason for shopping a retail food store.

"Familiarity in itself reduces uncertainty" (O'Shaughnessy p. 149).

Credibility was implied by the shopping duration which in turn implied a realization of personal values desired by the consumer.

Another implication was that the store was totally accepted as the purchasing agent for the household. It was apparently presumed by the consumer that the retailer would not risk placing poor quality and/or poor value products into the store--or if such would appear, the consumer would be able and willing to reject and re-evaluate the situation.

The store name and perceived image may project an image of quality, price, and value but was not an explicitly mentioned factor. Quality products were specifically mentioned by 17.3 percent of the survey respondents as being an important factor.

Rule 4. "Turn to the experience you can trust."

The consumers--the survey respondents--obviously did!

Rule 5. "Insure your trust."

The duration of shopping implied a self-guaranteed warranty for the results of the food store transaction. Trust and reinforced experiences appeared to provide the insurance for decisions that might not have been correct.

At the same time, the average respondent reported shopping in an average of 2.04 retail food stores. The back-up store, as well as a presumed knowledge of other alternative stores in the community, supported the original store selection criteria.

Trust and confidence were implied in the results of the analysis. Comfort areas or zones were implied. To reinforce these perceived bases for the continued patronage activity of the average consumer, the characteristic of product variety or mix was explicitly a factor necessary to create shopping satisfaction and avoid frustrations.

The importance for "variety" implied the need to continuously meet a variety of needs and wants which fluctuate and change over time. Variety also implied a means of risk avoidance and comfort zone enhancement. An increased price, the inconvenience of an out-of-stock, a special occasion or an unexpected or unanticipated need is hedged against by the availability of "variety." "Variety" increased the probability of solving a problem without the need of seeking out an alternative store in which to research and redecide among unfamiliar brands or product presentations.

#### *Employees as Change Agents*

The results imply that employees were not active change agents in the retail food store, or at least were not perceived as change agents. Likewise, the expectation that employees can cause change has yet to be determined.

Knowledge of the retail food industry suggests that few retail employees, possibly with the exception of a consumer advisor or dietician, are expected to intervene on behalf of a product or brand. Likewise retail employees for the most part are not trained in intervention techniques.

#### *Role of Time Stress*

The results lead one to conclude that the perceived amount of time available in contrast with the amount of time required for shopping affected the store selection and patronage: the same store was shopped an average of 6.88 years, and two stores were consistently shopped.

The willingness to process in-store and out-of-store information was manifested in the frequency to which "convenience" was expressed. The stress of time constraints expressed by Isenberg (1981) and Revelle (1976) and by the results of this study cause one to ask the extent to which employees contribute to or detract from shopping stress. The evidence suggests that employees contribute little to stress, contribute little to satisfaction, yet numerous respondents mentioned their importance to the shopping experience.

The responses given in definition to the term "convenience" were basically those in reference to reducing the time spent shopping, saving money, and reducing stress.

The economic shopper is defining frustration satisfaction and convenience in terms of time and money saved, the apparent goal of the shopping experience.

## *Initial Decision Stage*

Higher levels of employee helpfulness are presumed necessary and more cognitive to consumers during the initial shopping trips and during the first time contact with the store. In an ongoing relationship, cognitive relevance of helpfulness is assumed to be relatively invariable because once such behaviors are established, they appear to be given; and they need not be reaffirmed on a highly conscious level each time a shopping trip is made.

This study does nothing to disprove the findings of Hayer (1984) in which he reports that

. . . This study (p. 829) suggests that choice is the result of numerous experiences and evaluations which occur over a repeated number of trials (or purchases). Over these trials, consumers develop a set of simple choice tactics which permit quick yet satisfactory decisions.

The implied consumer objectives included a desire to seek a store in which a combination of factors facilitated the exchange of value between the customer and the store.

## *Post Analysis Definition*

The dependent variable, helpfulness, was defined in the early section of this paper. The results of the analysis lend additional insight into the definition of the concept, and confirm certain assumed characteristics associated with helpfulness.

What is helpfulness? The results suggest that helpfulness is more a situation that facilitates a convenient shopping trip, permits the store to maintain competitive if not advantageous prices, and creates a psychological availability of products and services. Helpfulness is being able to get out of the store promptly and without delay.

Helpfulness is being friendly and not rude, but helpfulness in general was apparently not a commodity, product nor offering easily perceived as being of assistance to the customer.

## **Recommendations**

### *Introduction*

This section presents several recommendations for strategic as well as tactical marketing to customers of retail food stores.

The marketing plan should be specific in its recommended strategies and tactics. The following recommendations present some alternatives that store management should consider.

### *Specific Recommendations*

The limited extent to which employees explicitly influenced consumers suggests a lack of awareness of employee services and activities by employees. The visible stocking and cleaning up, the check-out personnel, the baggers and carry-out personnel all apparently subservient to convenience and product variety among other things.

An improved helpfulness rating, if this is a management goal, will apparently be achieved by maintaining conspicuous levels of obvious service desired by the market segment at the location served by the store.

This leads to a second recommendation. Management should determine the level of service desired by the clientele served. This study did not attempt to compare the perceived present helpfulness level with the desired helpfulness level. This determination is recommended.

More specifically, management needs to periodically define the services most desired before any level of any one service is implemented. What do customers want? Can management afford to offer those services?

Services should be advertised and promoted in order to develop perceived distinctions between or among a store and its competitor(s). Various aspects of helpfulness and service should be placed in the promotional rotation of goods and services advertised by the store. Personalize the services.

It is recommended that management continuously re-evaluate the strategic goal of feasible helpfulness offered customers.

Services included in the helpfulness package should be costed out and positioned in such a fashion as to be profitable and active in facil-

itating the exchange of value between the store and its customers.

If a "helpfulness" strategy is implemented, monitor its success. Improve it, discontinue it or make whatever changes are necessary to maintain a feasible strategy.

Services create an image of helpfulness. Helpfulness creates distinction. Obvious services and the perception of helpfulness should improve and create satisfactions for the retail food store customer. Obvious services will provide an opportunity to make employees more significant to the customer. Should they be? The evidence is yes. Employees contribute to creating the image of helpfulness and the total store.

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