



Grocery shopping in the age of coronavirus:

Immediately after the coronavirus emerged on U.S. soil, most initial media inquiries centered on panic buying, intermittent out-of-stocks, and toilet paper shortages. Those early bumps in the road were just a prelude to the other more serious challenges Connecticut's grocers would confront almost simultaneously. The profound realization that grocery stores were ground zero for the potential communal spread of COVID-19 put intense pressure on every food retailer in the state to keep our associates and customers safe. Ever since, grocery retailers have been developing an improvised playbook that has changed the normal routine of customer shopping as well as the stores' physical settings. Many of these changes will last long after the coronavirus has vanished.

Social distancing, one-way aisles, plexiglass sneeze guards, enhanced sanitization efforts, temperature checks, facial protection, and limiting store capacity are all part of a new shopping normal. Not one of these crisis measures was in place just a month ago. The speed at which Connecticut food retailers pivoted to implement these changes is nothing short of remarkable. People still need food supplies to subsist and the local grocery store meets that basic need, however in the midst of a global pandemic it is now as important, that they feel a sense of personal safety while out shopping. Enhanced safety practices are now part of every retailer's management routine as shoppers' expectations on a trip to the supermarket have been transformed.

There was intense debate about the veracity of almost every single one of these measures prior to their implementation. From my perspective, they were all the right things to do at the time. A relevant longer-term question: which of these new safety practices, adopted at the height of the virus, will become a regular part of food shopping in the post-pandemic world? One thing is certain: food shopping will never be the same again. The virus has inexorably changed the grocery industry's footprint and is accelerating technology trends that were already underway.

Pre-pandemic, food retailers offering home delivery or curbside pickup for online orders had an advantage over those who did not. Today, we are seeing a much wider adoption of online services by more grocery retailers, as delivery companies like Mercado and Rosie step up to fill the void. This could mean that, in the future, a larger portion of a store's space will be set aside for preparing orders to-go—and less for customer traffic.

Touchless payment options such as Apple or Google Pay, which consumers have been slow to adopt, are sure to become more popular. The pandemic also makes increased automation a reality for companies looking to augment a reduced workforce. Less human interaction has become a probable outcome and is both a blessing and a curse for any brick-and-mortar retailer.

There is a real possibility that many of these changes will stay in place and ultimately influence how grocery stores are designed in the post-coronavirus retail environment. Until then, it is important that consumers continue to take common sense precautions when shopping for groceries, including:

- Maintain a physical distance of six feet between shoppers and employees;
- Whenever possible shop solo;
- Use credit or debit cards instead of cash;
- Avoid touching surfaces and use disinfectant wipes for touch points; and
- Properly dispose of gloves or masks immediately after exiting the store.

It will be interesting to see how these new store safety measures might transform consumers' food shopping experience going forward. My sense is that some of the changes will stay in place, and others will fade away. Ultimately, however, these measures—or lack thereof—will influence customers' perceptions of their grocery stores' values. Trust is the grocers' most valuable commodity, and the courageous men and women who continue to show up every day on the front line of food stores are working under challenging conditions to earn it.

In the meantime, grocery stores are doing all that they can to ensure their associates and customers are safe. By sharing best practices and continuing to deploy safe shopping defenses, food stores will continue to provide our communities with critical services during this difficult time. The coronavirus pandemic will undoubtedly alter the future of Connecticut's grocery community, and I trust we will be stronger for it.

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