

Image key to success of grocery store chains

HALIFAX (CP) — Grocery shoppers these days can be forgiven for wondering if they're somehow shopping in the futuristic world of George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four.

Computer scanners pick up the universal price code on consumers' purchases, and with the help of shoppers cards keep a record of what and how people buy.

Though the lists let stores know what to stock, they could also be used to computerize shopping in the grocery stores of the future, says a professor at Mount Saint Vincent University.

Eventually, once stores know a consumer's shopping pattern, the shopping can be over before the customer leaves the house, says Don Shiner, who's also an associate with the local office of the Peat Marwick management consulting firm.

"They could print your shopping list based on your past purchase, with the items, the sizes and the prices. And you could go down and check it off as you went through."

Printing the shopping list is just the beginning.

"The next thing is to pre-package the order and let you shop just for the things that you want," says Shiner, noting that this is already being done in parts of the United States.

Some U.S. stores are also experimenting with video terminals mounted on shopping carts.

"You enter the store, you register with your card as you come in. The store computer now knows that Ms. X is in the store and (based on past shopping references) when Ms. X is going by the Campbell soup display, for example, sensors will pick up the cart and an advertisement — possibly offering a discount on Campbell soup — would come up on the video screen.

"You go to the checkout . . . as the items go through the scanner the discount will be taken off the items as they go through."

Convenience is the battleground for modern-day grocery chains, which have to fight hard to keep consumers interested in their stores.

"Everybody believes they shop where they shop because of the prices, but ask anybody what they paid for soup, or a loaf of bread," says Shiner. "You'll find only about one in 10 will know the answer."

Most will agree with consumer expert Ranesh Vankat that a grocery store's image is the key to its success, even though it must also try to meet price challenges from its competitors.

"They are all trying to attract the same consumer dollar to some extent, so the grocery stores are trying to improve their image," says Vankat, a Saint Mary's University marketing professor.

Cut-throat price wars — which have lowered grocery prices recently in parts of Western Canada — only temporarily expand a chain's business, says Vankat.

"If you cut prices, you may be able to attract customers away from your competitor. But when prices go back to normal those customers are no longer loyal to you and they go back to shopping at the store which is the most convenient."

John Keizer, corporate affairs manager at Sobeys Inc., Atlantic Canada's biggest supermarket chain, says price most affected consumers' buying habits in the 1980s.

But with the introduction of new competitors like the Price Club discount chain, stores today are "focusing on customer service more than anything."

Consumers may not be able to pinpoint when those first service strategies came into play, but it's not hard to identify them.

In the last few years, supermarkets have developed ways to differentiate themselves from competitors, identify and get their customers into their stores, and to keep those customers coming back.

Stores are larger, with in-house services like post offices and pharmacies; customer loyalty clubs; incentive programs; and credit card shopping.

There is a trend toward organically grown foods and environmentally green products, and stores are also offering longer hours for the customer who works during the day, says Shiner.

The chains have also started franchising out part of their space — from fish counters to doughnut shops — so the store manager can concentrate on the core business.

'BEST RESTAURANTS IN AMERICA IN THEIR TIME'

Food on the rails was the way to go

ABOARD THE BROADWAY LIMITED (AP) — In their heyday, railways offered more than the sights of Chicago, Chattanooga and Omaha — they offered the tastes of barbecued lamb shanks, apricot pie and hot chili Roquefort canapes.

The Great Northern baked huge apples. The Northern Pacific touted one-kilogram baked potatoes purchased from farmers in the valleys the train traversed.

"These were the best restaurants in America in their time," says James Porterfield, a marketing instructor at Penn State University.

Porterfield has taken a sentimental journey to the glory days of railroading, and returned with Dining By Rail: The History and the Recipes of America's Golden Age of Railroad Cuisine.

"On land, you kill time to eat, but on a train you eat to kill time," said Ike Greenberg, a steward on the Illinois Central's Panama Limited.

Porterfield's book, published by St. Martin's Press, features 325 recipes from 46 railway lines.

The recipes have historic and nostalgic value, and gastronomic use as well: originally prepared in small kitchens hurtling along rails, they are easy to cook at home.



C.O. Riggings, a cook on Amtrak's Chicago-New York run, prepares pizza.

Early railways "didn't even think about feeding the passengers," Porterfield said. Scheduled runs were short — though often prolonged by derail-

ments, cattle on the track or delayed connections.

After one accident, passengers who were delayed by eight hours tried to roast an ox the train had

run over.

Boys hawked food on trains in the 1840s, and in the 1850s eating houses sprouted along the tracks.

"They would stop the trains

and let people off to get lunch," Porterfield said. "As competition for speed grew, stopping for an hour didn't make sense."

In 1862, the first meal for regular customers was served on the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad. A newspaperman reported being served oyster stew, pie, crullers and coffee.

George Pullman developed the "hotel car," with its on-board kitchen, in 1867 — two years after introducing the sleeper car.

The best service was on "limited" trains, catering to long-distance travellers.

"Businessmen were accustomed to fine service hotels in the cities they were staying in," Porterfield said. The railways followed suit, and competed with their food service.

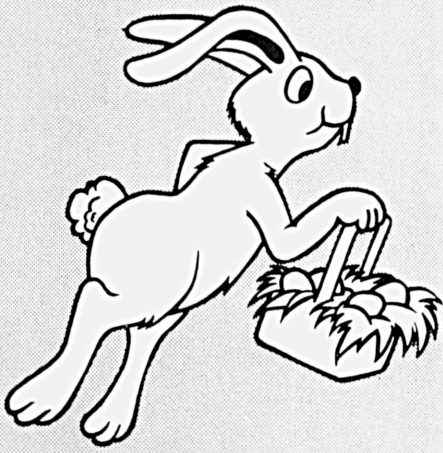
A typical menu on a Chicago and Northwestern train from Chicago to Omaha listed 13 entrees, six types of game and 25 desserts — for 75 cents each.

Service hit its height in the 1920s and 1930s, before airplanes bit into the business. In 1930, there were 1,742 dining cars on American rails.

Most private railways ended their dining operations in 1971, when Amtrak began. Last year, 67 dining cars were in service.

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Full details in Woolco stores.

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187 ea.

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