

THE COOP MAKING IT THROUGH COVID

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By Travis Hartman

In the spring of 2020, after the city-wide shutdown, Coop members stood patiently, six feet apart, snaking around the block, waiting for their turn to enter the Coop. Members would often wait for over an hour, with short lines only occurring during poor

weather or sheer luck.

Some members dealt with it well, while others did not.

LONG LINES

Paul Schickler, a member for 17 years, said, “I remember once the line was all the way down the street, around the corner and halfway down President Street.” It did not deter him from waiting, though, and he carried a chair with him to sit in.

There were also members like Janet Gottlieb who, estimating the length of the line and the amount of time to wait, sometimes concluded it was not worth the wait. “If I saw that the line was down to the corner of President, I wouldn’t wait,” she said.

Many shoppers stayed away altogether due to concerns about long lines or fear of infection. Shopping hours were drastically reduced, and for a short period, around a half day was set aside for senior citizens, to comply with COVID-19 safety protocols. The reduced availability of hours for members increased safety for members and workers alike, and allowed workers to properly maintain the Coop, in a world of ever-evolving information about how to combat the virus.

HUGE DROP IN SALES

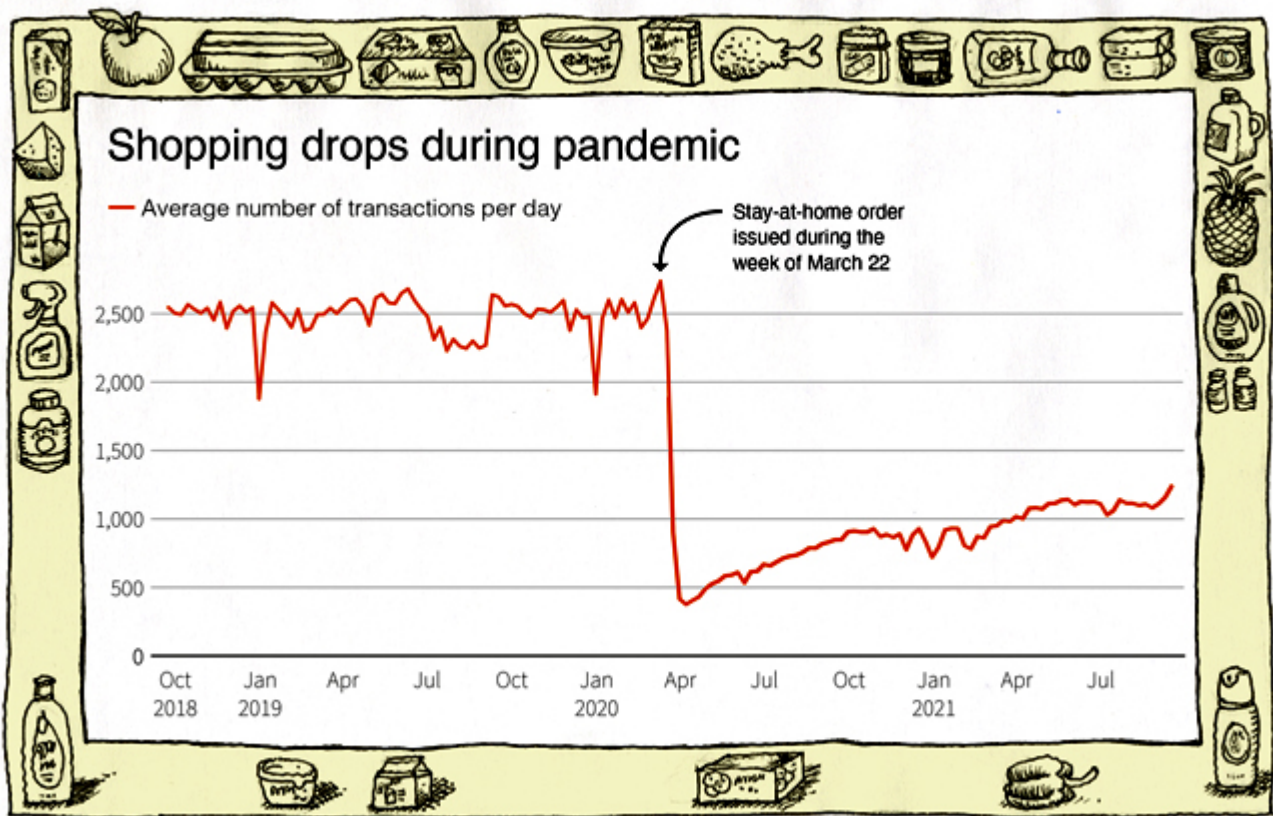


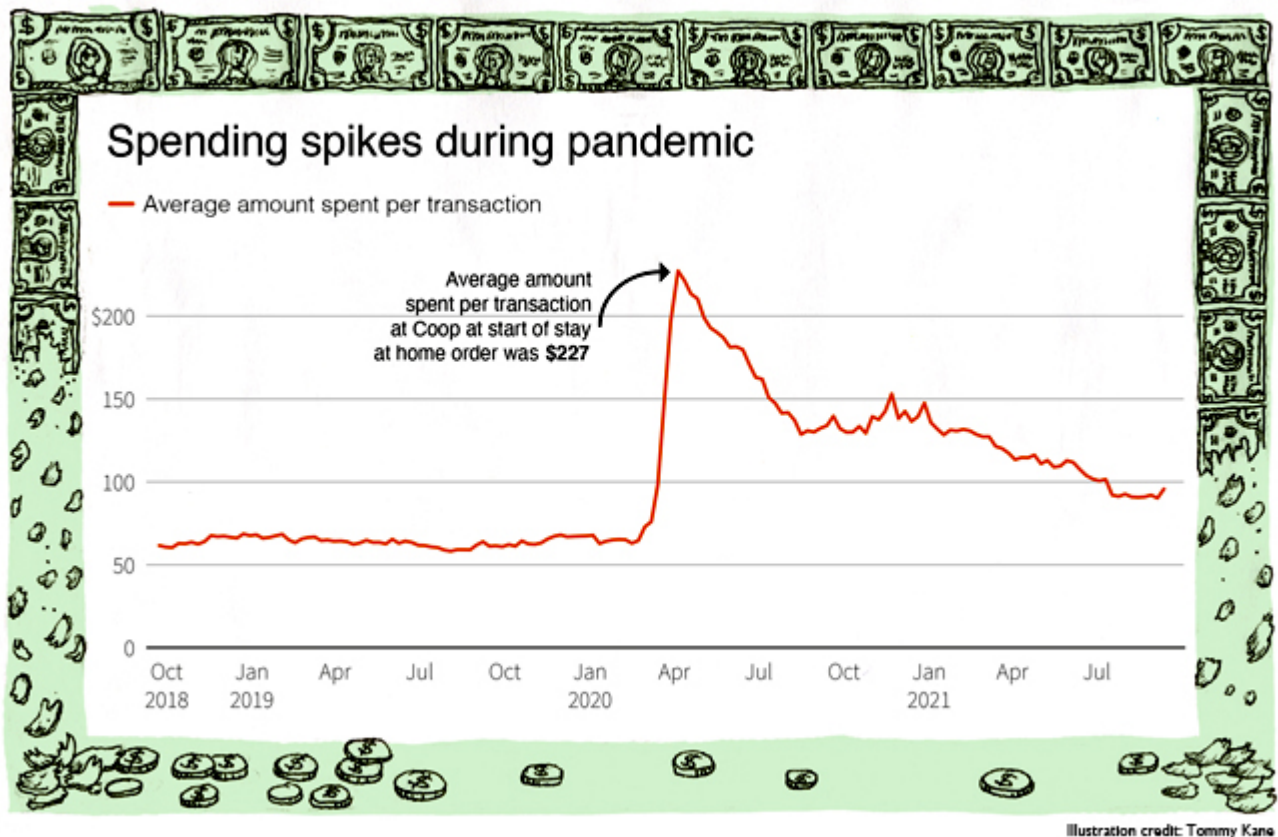
Illustration credit: Tommy Kane

Over the course of the first month of the New York State stay-at-home order, the average number of daily transactions dropped by 87%. It hit a low point of just under that figure, and the number of transactions has been rising steadily ever since, though tempered by lines, shortened shopping hours and a restricted number of members in the Coop at any given time.

Flora Wu said she would often stop by the Coop every day in pre-pandemic times, as she lives very close by, but the long lines kept her away initially, and she found other places to shop for various reasons.

“But I like that there aren’t so many people inside now,” she said, noting that not all the restrictions were without silver linings.

BUYING MORE STUFF



Despite the drastically lower number of transactions, the Coop saw a massive upsurge in the average amount per transaction. So while fewer people were shopping, they were spending much more. This resonates with recollections of stories about hoarding toilet paper and other sundries. Over the first month of the stay-at-home order, the average transaction tripled from \$76 to \$237. Since then, it has been returning to a more normal high, decreasing steadily to around \$95 as of mid-September.

BIG LOSSES

The reduced sales volume and hiring of temporary staff in place of member labor saw the Coop losing around \$100,000 per week in the beginning of the pandemic. In response, the Coop applied for and was granted a \$1.4 million PPP loan, as well as asked members to increase their voluntary investment in the Coop, which amounted to an additional \$800,000. Members also voted for a 4% mark up—which went into effect in August 2020—to improve financial solvency.



Coop members are back working their shifts, but it will take a while for membership to return to pre-pandemic levels.

RECOVERY

In some ways the Coop is still a shadow of its former self, but there are signs that it is recovering in significant ways. Currently, there are 84 shopping hours available in the week, compared to 100 in pre-pandemic time. 54 shoppers are allowed in the store compared to 35 or so when the pandemic began. There have been huge improvements in air filtration at the Coop to keep members safe, because as Coop manager Joe Holtz said, “We’ve taken great measures to make the air safe, and we’re gonna err on the side of keeping members safe.”

Two of the main drains on the Coop’s finances are currently in flux. The temporary pandemic support staff that was hired to work both full-time and part-time at the Coop was released when member labor came back online in mid-July.

“It was crucial that there were members willing and able to help, that was really im-

portant, and I thank them, they helped keep the Coop open—while we figured out how to have a safe return to member labor,” said Holtz.



General Coordinator Joe Holtz expressed his appreciation for the temporary labor that worked through the pandemic allowing the Coop to stay open.

SHRINKING MEMBERSHIP

The other financial drain is Coop membership, which is down an estimated 4,000 members, or around 23%. This equates to 23% of sales evaporating as well. Membership had been held at roughly 17,000 for the past few years, with about 2,200 members leaving each year for normal causes such as moving away. This was never a problem—every time a member left, there was a new one to replace them.

In terms of when we open membership back up at the Coop, and remove the financial drain of paying workers, Holtz said, “I don’t have an exact date; it’s an urgency and it should be as soon as possible, and we’re working towards it,” citing the logistics of balancing the safety of current members while devising a new orientation system. “The desire is there,” he said. “Inventing a new system is not finished.”

Overall, coordinators say the Coop is struggling because it needs more people to shop—and that the Coop needs more members.