

FLASH OF INSPIRATION OR IRRITATION? NEW 'NEXT MEMBER' LED SIGN SPARKS CONFUSION

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By Sara Ivry

There it is, flashing in green neon, affixed to the glass just inside the Coop's vestibule. To some, it is reminiscent of neon signs advertising beer at all-night groceries, beckoning thirsty customers who may or may not notice it or even need it as a reminder.

The sign, of course, is not for drinkers or smokers or those in search of Girls! Girls! Girls! It's for Food Coop members. And it reads "NEXT MEMBER," to nudge would-be shoppers waiting in the entrance line that their time has finally, at long last, come.

Maybe you've noticed it only upon walking through the automatic door on your way to show your identification card to the entrance worker. And maybe, like member

Alex LaMond, you have been thoroughly cheered by its bright and assertive presence.

HOW IS A PERSON WAITING IN LINE TO DETERMINE THE INTENTIONALITY OF THE FLASHING? IS IT MEANT FOR THEM, OR LEFT OVER FROM A SUMMONS INTENDED FOR THE PERSON BEFORE THEM?

"I really love it," LaMond said. "I've been a member since '01, so forever, and in the pandemic we were all really freaked out. I've admired the Coop's diligence in holding to safety protocols and mask wearing and the line outside—it was necessary," she said alluding to the blocks-long queue members waited in during the pandemic's earliest months.

At that time "we were all learning together, and it was challenging, anxiety provoking, so I really like the new member sign because it allows you to know, 'Come in.' It takes the guess work out, and it's not on the entrance person to wave their hand."

Others, however, are less charmed by the addition. Some question its utility, as well as its expense.

But at \$150, the cost of the sign is negligible, said Membership Coordinator Jason Weiner. He is the one who alit upon the idea for the innovation in early May. "I was trying to think of ways that we could capture members' attention quicker if they're at the front of the line," he explained.



PHOTO BY JENNIFER MACFARLEN

Like fellow membership coordinators, Weiner said he is “down on the floor all the time, and what I noticed with the entrance desk was the worker was often having an issue of letting the member know they can come inside, sometimes because [the member] couldn’t see through the doors. Sometimes the member was on the phone, not paying attention.”

So, Weiner found SpellBrite, an Elmhurst, Ill.-based company that makes custom LED signs that plug in to regular electrical outlets. He fashioned a hard-wire switch for entrance desk workers to turn the sign on and off at will. When switched on, the light flashes incessantly. If the entrance desk worker neglects to turn it off, the non-stop flashing is at risk of becoming little more than the visual equivalent of ambient noise.

“SOMETIMES I PLAY WITH IT, AND I TURN IT OFF TO SEE IF ANYONE NOTICES. NOBODY NOTICES.”

MICHAEL RING, ENTRANCE WORKER

That was how it struck this shopper on a recent visit. If the sign flashes non-stop even as the line to enter advances, how is a person to determine the intentionality of the flashing? Is it meant for them, or left over from a summons intended for the person before them, or simply evidence of entrance worker forgetfulness?

“The worker has the power to control it,” Weiner said, “so what happens is if there aren’t a lot of people in line, they leave it on. It just flashes.”

In Weiner’s experience, the reception to the sign has been generally positive.

“The amount of times the entrance worker hears people say ‘I love that sign,’ it happens constantly,” he said. “People get excited for new innovations—a nice welcoming sign for the members.”

Michael Ring, an entrance worker who works his own shift as well as that of his wife, agreed that in the first few weeks of the sign's presence, shoppers commented on it. They thought it was cute, he said. But soon it became part of the scenery. They stopped mentioning it.

"Sometimes I play with it, and I turn it off to see if anyone notices," Ring said. "Nobody notices. It's big and gaudy, but nobody notices. It needs to be outside, not inside. People get to the front of the line and they look at their phones. They need a poke with a stick, a honk. An audio announcement of 'Step in' would work better. We need a sign that says, 'Have your card ready and your mask on when you get to the front of the line.' Dude, there's people behind you that want to shop."

Karen Fuller, a member since 2004 who sometimes does entrance desk work as part of her work commitment, seconds Ring's observation that the lure of the phone screen preoccupies members, frequently rendering the sign useless.

"They're not looking up. And you keep flicking the light, or making a motion," but it doesn't register, she said. Moreover, "it's used inconsistently, because people in line, not to mention the entry workers, don't know when to use the sign....and you still have the 'NEXT' board, and you can pick that up. Sometimes you just hand gesture to people and wave them in." She is hopeful perhaps winter's onset will make a difference in the sign's impact. "Maybe it will be better in the darker months," she said. "The sign's light will be more prominent."



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