MOODOMETER: THE RETURN OF CROWDED AISLES

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By Miranda Purves

On a recent July Sunday afternoon outside the dear old Coop, things were feeling positively *Sesame Street*. Receiving workers paused to chat with friends, walkers sauntered in with carts, and children celebrating a birthday party raced into the foyer to find a scavenger-hunt clue. Suddenly, the mood darkened. “I was in line, you [expletive]! Didn’t you see my kid holding my spot?” a man yelled. He was about 6’4″, and the object of his rage was a somewhat shorter shopper waiting to enter the store. Other than him, the line consisted of a child who, up until that minute, had been darting around the place-marker pylons, spraying the laminated numbers from a bottle, his face behind a plastic shield.

“I didn’t know he was in line,” the recipient of the onslaught uttered, pulling back from the finger jutting into his face. The crowd quieted as the angry man continued to step toward him. “Don’t talk! Have some respect,” he said menacingly. The neon NEXT sign flashed and the man strode inside, commanding his child to wait by his car-

go bike, while the victim of the aggression tried to regain his composure—as did the now-silenced crowd.

Despite the pandemic accouterments of the masks and spray bottles, the rest of the scene resembled the before times: the density of people outside; the genial, lively mood; the sudden altercation. In the past few months at the Coop, other than Coop co-founder and General Manager Joe Holtz being barred without pay for a month, the big news is old news: just as we'd gotten used to shopping under what former Governor Andrew Cuomo once called the "new normal," the normal-normal Coop has begun to seem possible again, including the defining feature of the return of somewhat more crowded aisles.

There are currently 62 orange shopper tags, aka "carrots," that the Coop uses to count and limit shoppers in the aisles. According to General Coordinator Ann Herpel, this number has been the same since fall of 2021. But those 62 carrots are running through more shoppers' hands throughout the day. We're also filling our carts at a less-harried pace.



Members are seeing the return of a familiar sight in the Coop: crowded aisles. “Shopping had become utilitarian; you were coming to get your five things and get out,” said Caroline Todd, a transportation planner with the MTA who was waiting outside for her shift to start. “Now it’s somewhere between the old days and that.”

The evolution of hyperexpedient shopping during the pandemic is a lovely example of what design and management theorists call *emergence*. This refers to novel behaviors and innovations that spring into existence organically when different elements within complex systems interact.

“As we all got accustomed to what was happening, people developed tools to make it easier for themselves,” Herpel said. The management quickly adapted to the crisis by combining recommendations from New York state—enforced traffic-flow patterns and decals on the floor marking distances—with new paid employees at the front of the Coop.

“No one was really interested in spending a lot of time in here,” Herpel said. “We were trying to facilitate that, and members responded and began to come in extraordinarily prepared to shop, with very detailed lists, schematically working out where things were on the shelves.”

Now some of the fear has lessened, and so has the distance between us. People are reaching over and under, navigating right-of-way and even—*gasp!*—gabbing in the aisles. Inevitably, this means more snapping as well as pleasantries. “People are forgetting about personal space again,” said Todd. But she quickly added that she loves the Coop. “We’re used to some chaos in the lines!”

The Coop’s commercial certificate of occupancy allows for 250 people within its 6,000 square feet. If you divide 6,000 by 250 you get 24 square feet per person, which sounds great: roughly a five-foot radius. But once you take into account the shelving, the checkout areas, the dairy stocking case, the individual carts and the Hollywood and U-boats, that space cushion evaporates.

In other words, we have plenty of legal leeway to sardine ourselves. Until the pandemic, that left the Coop management to determine a reasonable capacity. They had some experience managing crowds on the fly before. Herpel described the scene in October 2012 as Hurricane Sandy blew in: people shoving inventory in backpacks, totes, anything, because all the carts and baskets were in use (they kept more out then), while the checkout line snaked around and then doubled up in produce.

“If someone had passed out in an aisle, the firefighters from next door would’ve taken minutes to get through,” Herpel said. “You could just tell it wasn’t safe.” They decided to hand shoppers numbers and warehouse them upstairs in the meeting room, calling them down as people left.

But it wasn’t until the peak lockdowns in the spring and early summer of 2020 that the store faced external strictures. The state said that essential businesses that remained open needed to operate at no more than 50 percent occupancy and provide six feet of distance between customers. At the Coop, having 125 people in the store wouldn’t allow for six feet between them.

“We settled on 30,” recalled Herpel, “then for a long time we stayed at 40.” The store increased capacity incrementally, two at a time. After the staff was fully vaccinated, they became more comfortable with letting more shoppers in. Once member workers returned in July 2021, they decided to try 56 orange carrots and 20 blue, for workers to shop after their shifts, before settling on the current 62 and ending the requirement that member workers take a carrot to shop post-shift.

The state has long since lifted its capacity limits, but the Coop is so far sticking to its own, finding that this number allows in most members who want to shop without long outside waits. But membership is beginning to creep back up. Before the pandemic, it hovered above 17,000. In 2020, either because members faded away or decisively left, the number was down by 50 percent. Currently, there are 13,500.

Many of the members outside on that Sunday relished the increases and were happy

that shoppers were back in the aisles. “I don’t want a line outside!” said Adam Pollock, a Park Slope resident and father of the birthday girl on the scavenger hunt. “I’d rather it be crowded inside, as COVID recedes.” His partner, Michal Lewin-Epstein, added, “I want non-member visits to resume!”

> “THE MORE THE MERRIER! DURING THE PANDEMIC, SHOPPING WAS A HORROR SHOW, A KUBRICK MOVIE, AWFUL.”
>
> *MEMBER JAMES RUSCHAK*

James Ruschak, a member for over 20 years, was standing outside while his cousin, who was working, brought him New York State cherries that had just hit the shelves. “The more the merrier!” he said. “During the pandemic shopping was a horror show, a Kubrick movie, awful.”



Coop member James Rushak

The new members interviewed for this article—who, it's important to note, have never experienced the pre-pandemic crowds that were once the norm—echoed Ruschak's sentiment, describing shopping as less stressful now that the store is busier.

Emily Seager, a Rockaway Beach resident, joined almost a year ago in July 2021. "People were on edge then," she said. "I value people feeling more comfortable now, walking closer to each other. There's not as much anxiety."

But Kate Barrow, a social worker and management consultant for nonprofit organizations, still remembers holiday shopping and the different kind of tension generated by Coop crowds, even when they're not the possibly-contagious, burned-out, masked zombies we've all been in the more-recent past.

"I had so many of those experiences [of personal space invasions] pre-pandemic that

anytime it was super crowded I would just end up leaving, as in: I can't handle this stress. 'I think I'm being really polite, you seem to think I'm being really rude, I don't know what to do,'" Barrow said.

Laura Tucker, a writer, noted that shopping in the 35-people days did have a certain luxuriousness. "This is the first Sunday that I am struck by how crowded it is. But I understand they have to do what they have to do," she said.

Some of the Coop pandemic changes will serve to make the store a little less crowded even if we do zoom back up to 17,000 and do away with the carrots. Now, shift changes are staggered. "It took a pandemic to figure this out!" laughed Herpel. "We used to always complain pre-pandemic on a Saturday afternoon at 3:30 when a bunch of people would come off of checkout, food processing and receiving shifts, 'Why did you come shopping at shift change?'"



General Coordinator Ann Herpel

> “THERE IS A CAPACITY TO THE COOP. I DON’T THINK THERE’S AN AGREEMENT AS TO WHAT THAT CAPACITY IS. WHAT COULD WE FINANCIALLY SUPPORT?”
>
> *GENERAL COORDINATOR ANN HERPEL*

Management has also gotten better at comparing revenue with membership information. Because each transaction is tagged to a household membership number, they can see which members are actually shopping and how much each household buys. The store has always had access to these numbers but didn’t make use of them until trying to survive the financial crisis in 2020 with the help of federal aid, when both capacity limits and membership cut sales by about 30 percent. Going forward, this data analysis will help us determine how, and when, to grow.

“There is a capacity to the Coop. I don’t think there’s an agreement as to what that capacity is,” said Herpel. “What could we financially support? It depends on what you want to do.”

If shopping is more pleasant at a $42 million business rather than a $58 million business, the Coop would have to make choices, such as having fewer staff members, which is the biggest expense, she said.

But the Coop has to plan for some growth to keep up with inflation, which puts pressure on operating expenses. Even when the economy isn’t grappling with runaway numbers, the Federal Reserve aims for a 2-percent-per-year target. To stay solvent, the store needs either to increase the number of shoppers, which equals crowded aisles, or encourage fewer shoppers—via incentives, refunds, minimums or other mechanisms—to buy more food. Or there’s the option of markup increases—which would be about as popular as solar power in coal country.

How we feel about crowded aisles is an issue central to how we want to structure our-

selves, what we want to take away from the pandemic and what we don't. Barrow mused that it might be preferable to keep a capacity limit permanently, particularly since there isn't a clear-cut end to COVID-19. But Ruschak's in favor of letting it all resume: "I'm a closet sociologist so I kind of liked the old way. Even when it was bad, it was good!"

Miranda Purves is a writer who's lived in the South Slope since 2005.