

January 2008

Supermarket of the future?

Bloom, a chain of Mid-Atlantic and Southeastern supermarkets owned by Food Lion, is designed to create a "convenient, hassle-free, and novel shopping experience" that lets shoppers get in and out fast, navigate easily, and sidestep long lines.

"We spent two years surveying customers in the U.S. and Europe, asking them what they wanted in a grocery store," says Karen Peterson, a Bloom spokeswoman. Twenty-eight Blooms opened in 2007, joining 33 already in existence.

We sent a reporter to a store in Leesburg, Va., to do some supermarket shopping. His conclusion: Supermarkets everywhere could learn from Bloom.

It's convenient. Parking spots near the entrance are reserved for families with small children and customers who plan to be in and out in 20 minutes. Shelves are about a foot lower than at most stores, and aisles are about a foot wider than usual, with few displays to block traffic.

It's high-tech. Touch-screen displays at kiosks let you check prices (Peterson says prices are comparable to those at Food Lion), find products, match food with wine, even scan a bar code to get recipes using that food. You can make a shopping list online at www.shopbloom.com and print it while supermarket shopping at the store. The list notes the aisle for each item.

It makes sense. You don't have to crisscross the store to find what you need. Most foods are on one side, nonfoods on the other. Organics are in one section along the store's perimeter. Milk is actually near the checkout, so you needn't wend your way to the back of the store. Carts display the store's floor plan.

It answers questions. Among Bloom's staff are "taste ambassadors," chefs who offer dinner tips and recipes. A Bloom store has about 30 percent more staff than a typical Food Lion.

Checkout is a breeze. At most Blooms, you can scan and bag groceries as you shop. You sign up for a card, scan it at a rack of pistol-shaped bar-code readers, and take the reader that lights up. You then click on each purchase, bagging as you go. After some coaching on this novel wrinkle in supermarket shopping, our reporter found it a snap to add and delete items. At the checkout, you scan the card to end your trip, get an itemized receipt, and pay. There's no scanning at the register and no need to flash a loyalty card: Any discounts are available to all shoppers. Bloom reserves the right to look inside bags at any time. If the scanning proves accurate, that shopper's bags are less likely to be inspected in the future.



Kiosks give info on product location, recipes, and more.