



Seeing Shopping *Again* for the Very First Time

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[2013 Charles Coolidge Parlin Award](#) | [American Marketing Association](#)

[2007 EXPLOR Award; with Wharton group](#) | [American Marketing Association](#)

[2004 Top 50 Innovators](#) | [Fast Company Magazine](#)

Adjunct Senior Research Fellow | [Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science, University of South Australia](#)

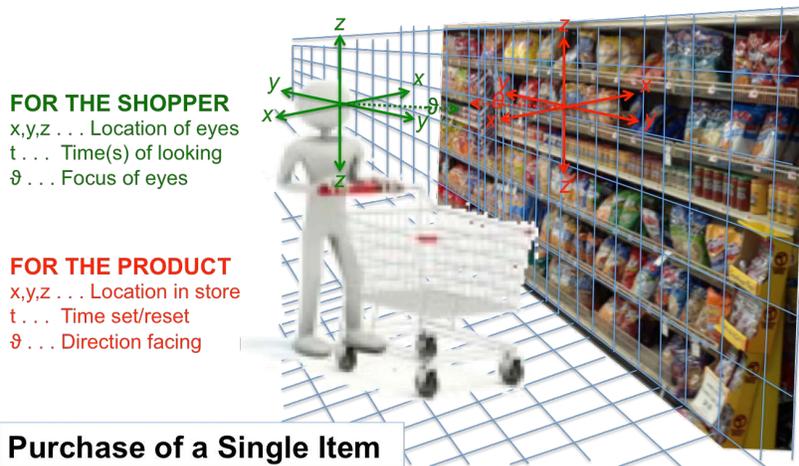
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Occasionally one has the opportunity to see a convergence of earlier ideas that bring into sharper focus the subject at hand. This is the case with this issue of the *Views*, which converges 3 earlier ideas, to clarify the proper way to see shopping from a strictly scientific point of view - but at the same time with *tremendous* commercial significance. The three points covered, broadly address the issue of navigability through the stores.

Let's begin with a single shopper purchasing a single item. After all, all of retail, whether bricks or clicks, builds on this as the basic unit of sales:



This illustrates the effective two parties to the purchase, the shopper *and the product*, and it is useful to begin recognizing the complementarity between those two parties, in order for a purchase to occur. Here we will balance the interests of the *two!* The complementary dimensionally diagrammed, is to call attention to one way of capturing *both* parties to the purchase, in a common metric system - not a different one for each. This will be very significant going forward in understanding the *process* by which purchases occur. Purchases *are* processes, not simply events to be tabulated, but processes to be understood.

Bidirectional Search

The first principle discussed here as driving shopping is what I call bidirectional search. I've written about it in "[Googling](#)" [the Store](#). It is important because it is *the* fundamental process of shopping: the retailers/suppliers are "looking for shoppers," (searching,) at the same time that shoppers are looking for products, (searching.) The first part of that is sometimes not properly recognized by the industry, primarily because of the relatively passive role played by the industry at the final point of purchase.

Passivity, in turn, leads to poor achievement of their potential by the merchant warehousemen retailers with their neighborhood warehouses, where merchandise is "stored." I'm saying this in a bit of a stark way in trying to break through to the obvious, when certain mechanical ways of looking at things, particularly accounting, i.e., *counting* events, have become deeply embedded in thinking, and retail metrics. What we are doing here is integrating some of the concepts outlined in "[The Amazonian Ghost](#)", where we discussed projecting ourselves into the sales process, much as Patrick Swayze projected himself into Demi Moore's affairs in the movie "Ghost."

Retailers/Suppliers are of course not personally present to do this "looking", or search, but instead rely on their surrogates, the displays/products to do the search for them. For the retailer it is a "display" while for the supplier it is more about "products," but that is emphasis by each party for obvious reasons if you think it through.

So here are all the displays/products in the store, more or less doing their best to "shout" at the shoppers passing by, fundamentally shouting, "buy me, buy me . . . no-no-no, BUY ME!!!" It's no wonder shoppers typically shop the store so superficially - it's a matter of their retaining their sanity; and largely done by the subconscious mind cueing them up when it is likely appropriate for them to consciously pay attention to something. They are aided in maintaining a certain obliviousness, through their "clutter filter" that screens from consideration everything except the little bit that makes it through the cacophonous roar that retailers/suppliers provide, in THEIR search for shoppers to buy their products. Remember, Whisper, Don't Shout (or mumble!)

Never forget this perspective, because it should drive store design and operations - shoppers looking for products; products looking for shoppers. Mr. Retailer, Ms. Brand Supplier, you can be far more effective on your side of the search, by working *with* the shopper, rather than indiscriminately shot-gunning from *your* side of the aisle/display interface.

Products/Shoppers Competition

The second principle we are considering here is that there is an actual competition going on in the store, BETWEEN THE PRODUCTS AND THE PEOPLE SHOPPING! That's right, and this competition gets very personal, particularly in the selection process, when it is THIS shelf/product display, talking to THIS specific shopper/passersby (see illustration above.) I won't discuss this in detail, because that up close and personal communication between products and people has more to do with package and planogram design than store design, which we want to focus on here. However, I mention one at-the-shelf principle:

Shoppers do not like to be "talked down to!" This is the reason that top shelves are typically very poor places to sell anything. Shoppers don't want their products staring at them from eye level. Rather, the products should be humble supplicants looking UP to the shopper from 30-60 inches above the floor. (And that IS where most purchasing occurs, because those products have the decency to respectfully look UP to their "masters," the shoppers.)

Other than right at the shelf, the competition between products and people is almost totally under the control of the store designer, and is revealed by how much SPACE the designer allocates to the displays/products, vs. how much space is allocated to the shopper. We call this measure "[The Aisleness of Stores,](#)" because the more products/displays you jam into the store, the more aisles you will need. Think about that a bit in reverse. More and more aisles in the same space actually means more and more displays. Maybe we should have called it "the display-ness" of the store. But either way it is a real number that you can compute for any floor plan, and show the share of the store allocated to shoppers, vs. the share allocated to products.

Of the total square footage allocated to displays (including checkouts, typically) vs. that allocated to shoppers, what percentage is exclusively for products? In other words, of the floor space within the general merchandising area, how much do the products get (necessitating aisles) vs. how much do the shoppers get? That percentage is a MAJOR controller of the efficiency of the store!!!

Think of *aisleness* as a sales suppressor. And the higher it is, the more you are favoring the competition of products over the people. Although retailers ignore these facts - mostly - they have learned to provide lots of open space on the perimeter and in produce and other "open" areas, where the vast majority of sales actually occur.

Open Space Actually Attracts Shoppers - Think Navigation!

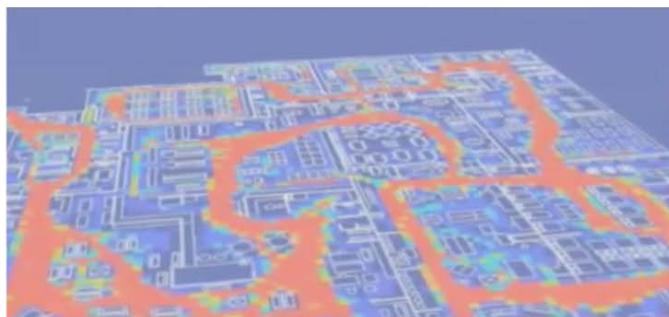
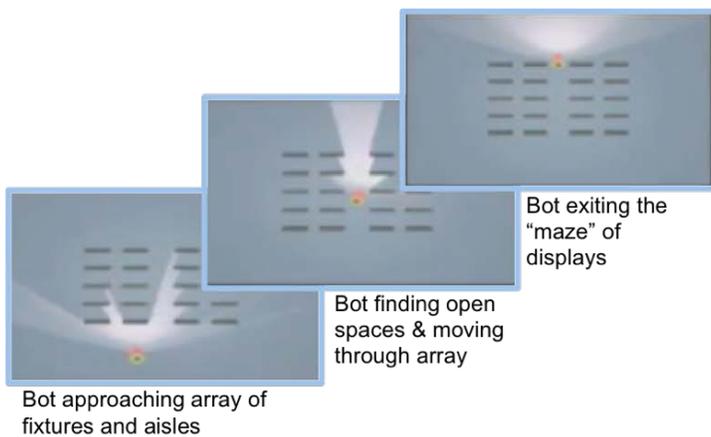
The third principle, which is actually the root driver of the second, is that shoppers are subconsciously drawn to open space.

This attraction is explained by Professor Alan Penn, of the University College London, showing EXACTLY how open space MOVES shoppers around the store! If you want shoppers to go somewhere, open it up. If you don't care if they go there, jam it up!

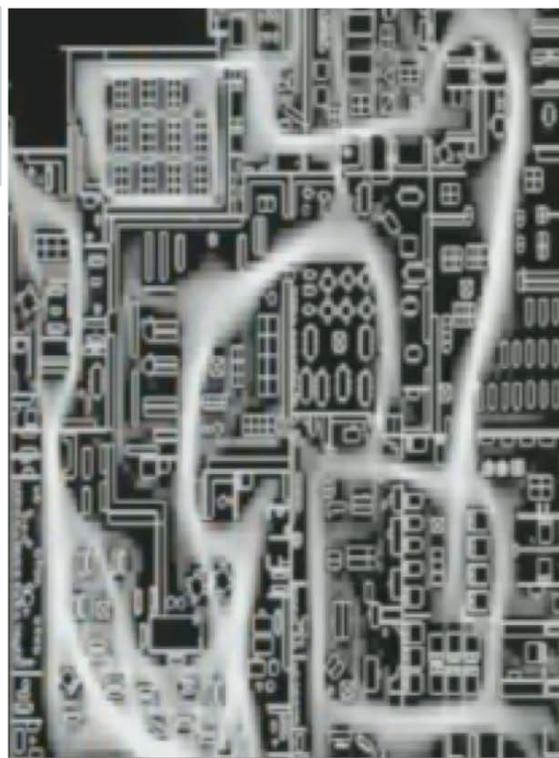
The reason for this is that shoppers shop through their eyes, primarily, not through careful, rational thinking, but by habit and instinct. This is part of why I often urge what should be an obvious fact, "if the shopper does not see it, it is *NOT* in the store." Have a little common sense and recognize that the shopper is only going to see a small fraction of the store, up close and personal. If you are going to manage the sales process, you better know what that small fraction that they will see is, and everything about store design is about SEEING!!!

Also, it is ideal to have a very wide, open track circumnavigating the store, with the view on at least one side of that track having a wide vista above nearby displays, so that vision reaches to the furthest areas of the store. It's OK to have LOTS of merchandise seen at a distance - let the shopper go the distance if THAT merchandise resonates with them - don't try to jam it all into their faces. (Discussed relative to Costco, in Selling Like Amazon... in Bricks & Mortar Stores!)

Professor Penn and one of his students, made an ingenious illustration of how shoppers respond to space. They did this for an IKEA floor plan, by creating a model store that consisted of only floor space and blank blocks representing the displays and fixtures through the store. Here you can see how their open-space sensitive bots created the exact same paths that were created when real shoppers walked in the real fully stocked store:



Bot-crowd released on IKEA floor; with their collective paths recorded by turning steps into *red*, & lack of steps into *blue*.



Here we have the actual paths of shoppers through the IKEA store. Open space CREATES paths!

In the upper left you see three successive scenes of a "bot" approaching an array of "shelf" displays with the displays blocking vision, and open spaces "seeable" as indicated by the lights penetrating the array. The Bot moves in the direction of the most light/seeable space., and makes its way to the widest aisle, and down that to exiting the array of displays.

On the lower left you see this principle with a crowd of these "bots" making their way through an IKEA store model, with floor and fixtures matching a real store. The steps of the bots on the floor turns the floor redder, and non-stepping, over time, turns it bluer. On the right, the white cloud on the same floor plan is the recorded paths of actual shoppers in the real IKEA store. Thus, open space ALONE *drives* the paths of the shoppers. There may be multiple major paths, but ALL of them will have the characteristic of wide visual accessibility. (You can see a more complete video illustrating and explaining all of this at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkePRXxH9D4>)

So we have discussed three principles that should drive store design, and impact selection at the shelf, too:

- **Bidirectional Search** - products search for shoppers; shoppers search for products.
- **Products/Shoppers Compete for Space** - they occupy interfacing spaces.
- **Open Space Actually Attracts Shoppers** - Think Navigation!

All of the references here to prior issues of the *Views*, shows that these principles have been recognized and appreciated before, but not seen as the mosaic of shopping, and particularly navigation, in the store. This reminds me of something JRR Tolkien observed about a beautiful painting that you might buy and hang in a prominent place for your regular enjoyment. But as time goes by, and you see it again and again, it gradually fades from your consciousness. Until, possibly, a guest seeing it for the first time exclaims, "what a beautiful painting!" And then you look at it anew and say, "yes, it is quite lovely!" Here the painting went from something of great appreciation to being virtually invisible through familiarity, then becomes again a thing of wonder and joy when brought to your attention again.

This principle applies, to an extent, to the "wonder and joy" of this incredible thing we have, self-service retailing, that came into being only about 100 years ago, with massive, positive global impact for consumers, retailers and their suppliers. See: [Retailing: the Trojan Horse of Global Freedom and Prosperity](#). In fact, there were people 100 years ago who understood the glories of self-service retail going on around them, and didn't just see it as "pile it high, and let it fly!" (See: [US Patent 1,242,872](#), Clarence Saunders, "Self Serving Store," 1917, for then; and [Stew Leonard: My Story](#), Nov 16, 2009, for today.)

By studying that history, and measuring everything going on in the store, I like to think we have scraped the dulling familiarity of this marvelous painting, to once again stand in awe at the view. It might seem odd that it would take a scientist, mindful of Lord Kelvin's dictum, "If you cannot express your knowledge in numbers, it is of a meager and unsatisfactory sort!" to understand the "scene" of modern self-service retailing. But I am hoping an increasing number of fellow viewers will delight in the perspective - and see the obvious, again - possibly for the very first time.

My colleague Mark Heckman, and I, are getting closer to rolling out a comprehensive retail management system - "Accelerated Merchandising™." Thinking things through from scratch, again, has been a privilege, particularly putting the science of retailing into an historical perspective. Every principle discovered can be validated by the successes and failures of the past 100 years, and accounts for the rise and fall of the retail giants in our own time. We believe it shows the way from where we are today, to increased performance for all self-service retailers, both bricks and online, going forward. Here we want to share a significantly different view of the self-service sales process going on in stores around the world. I hope you find this useful to your own thinking!

Here's to **GREAT "Shopping"** for YOU!!!
Your friend, Herb Sorensen

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