

Bill Rea ? Business end of shopping

I found myself mixed up in an interesting conversation last week with one of the women in my office.

It was late in the day, and she was making preparations to go home. I still had work to do, so I was busy at my desk. But I told her I wouldn't be staying too long because I had to get home and do the grocery shopping.

She mentioned that her husband usually accompanies her on these sort of weekly excursions, which she appreciates because she hates the task.

I told her my wife and I always do the shopping together, and have done so over the 15 years we've been married.

It's part of the division of labour in our household. Beth does most of the cooking and cleaning, and I do the laundry and most of the yard work. There is a bit of overlap in those duties. Having lived on my own for many years before I got married, and having waited tables for a couple of years, I am pretty kitchen-literate.

But when it comes to the grocery shopping, that's always been a shared responsibility, and that is likely to remain the case.

I think there was one week early in our marriage when Beth was under the weather, so I had to do the shopping on my own. And being the wonderfully romantic slob that I am, I made sure flowers were included in the bags I lugged home. There was another occasion not long after when I was down with some ailment, and Beth had to do the shopping all by herself. Only I didn't get flowers that night. On the positive side, we were well within our grocery budget that week. More about that later.

There are some people who considered grocery shopping the task of the woman of the house. But I think that goes back to the days of stay-at-home moms, when the shopping was done during the day with kids in tow. I have lots of memories of being one of the kids in tow.

Actually, I have observed over the years, pushing the cart up and down the aisles, that both genders are represented just about equally when it comes to doing the shopping. That really shouldn't come as a surprise.

The colleague I mentioned above said she's happy to have her husband with her. But that is not always the case.

My mother used to like doing the shopping on her own, and not so much because she particularly enjoyed handling the burden. She liked to be boss of the operation, and my dad, when he accompanied her (which happened a lot after they retired) was always trying to get interesting and innovative items into the cart. Mom would have none of it.

My father spent several years of his working life travelling through Europe, where he, understandably, acquired a taste for some of the local foods, and tried to pass that on to his family. There was one occasion he brought home some exotic cheeses from France, and insisted the whole family sit down at the kitchen table to sample them. I well remember my mother taking a whiff of one of the offerings, looking Dad in the eye, and telling him it smelled like urine.

No wonder the only contact she ever wanted my old man having with the shopping cart was pushing it.

But grocery shopping together is something Beth and I have been doing since we got married some 15 years ago. Somebody, after all, has to push the cart, as well as decide which check-out line is likely to move faster. Then someone has to make the witty comments to the young lady (it is almost always females) who works the cash register. There's been more than one occasion when Beth has accused me of ?flirting.? Can I help it if I'm irresistible?

Prior to my being married, I lived alone, so I did my own shopping. Thus I had some experience to bring into the situation of marital bliss when it came to collecting the groceries. The problem was in those days, my shopping wasn't a regular occurrence. The Toronto office where I was working at the time was just a couple of blocks away from a large supermarket, so I got into the habit of stopping on the way home to stock up on anything I knew I was running short of (cheese and crackers were a staple of my diet in those days ? they still are). Granted, that was not very efficient, or economical, but since I was mainly worried about pleasing myself in those days, who really cared? As well, I have always realized that my dietary habits have not been the best, so it rather fit in nicely with my style.

I had to get married to learn the nuances of responsible shopping.

I did indicate that I would address the budget issue. Budgeting is a very important part of it all, which leads me to wonder how many people actually set targets when it comes to their grocery spending. I suspect there are a lot of you out there who don't.

The budgeting instinct was, I believe, one of the assets I brought into the marriage. It was drilled into me by parents (when they weren't squabbling over what went into the shopping cart). The rules are basically simple, mainly figure your expenses for the year, and divide it by the number of pay cheques you expect to cash. Set that amount aside, and you'll do okay.

I had been practising it since I had been living on my own, using it to cover my rent, phone bill, insurance, etc. I started budgeting for car maintenance the year after an unexpected repair bill gobbled up just about every red cent I had set aside for my vacation.

But during the days when I was on my own, I didn't budget for my groceries. That was part of my out-of-pocket expenses, so how

much and how well I ate depended on how much money was left in my wallet at a given date.

I was obliged to become somewhat more disciplined when I got married, if for no other reason than Beth told me to. Groceries became another item when it came to household budgeting.

Granted, the budget has been increased over the years, in deference to the reality of inflation. But we do a pretty good job of staying within it. In fact, about the closest we ever come to genuine arguments involves the grocery budget. I have sometimes suggested it should be increased, and Beth resists the idea, stressing the need for discipline. It's sometimes a hard issue to resolve.

Running the odd deficit is not a bad thing, as long as you try to stay in target. And unlike most governments I can think of, that's what we try to do

