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Food woes compounded by questionable practices

by Mark Pavilons

Canadians are in the midst of one of the worst inflationary periods for food in our history.

We're plagued by high prices and scarce products on shelves.

As polite Canucks, we didn't say much when butter hit $7 per pound or a good steak breached the $30 mark.

Those who do the grocery shopping each week know all too well how food prices are dinging the bank account.

And there are some new and strange activities going on that make us question the conglomerates.

By now, most of us are used to shelf-checkouts, albeit many still don't like it. Replacing humans cashiers with machines can't be a good thing, can it?

I'm not sure if it's this particular practice, or the sky-high prices, but food theft is also at an all-time high.

But then again, so are profits for the grocery chain giants.

Stores have installed gates and barriers, as ?loss prevention measures.?

Just recently, it was mentioned that some Loblaw-owned stores notified customers their receipts may be checked upon exiting. Wow.

Okay, some stores like Walmart have been doing that for years now, but given the financial pain at grocery store checkouts, many see this as a really bad move.

Spin-doctoring has the chain telling customers they're doing this to verify and maintain inventory. Ya right.

Legal experts note that such a practice isn't enforceable by law, so you don't have to comply and can just pleasantly decline.

But some are undoubtedly going to see this as an intrusion, an invasion of sorts.

Shoplifting, too, is on the rise, but there are some legal loopholes here. Retail store staff can't touch you or detain you, even if it's obvious you've taken something.

In my youth, pinching so much as a gumball would result in the store owner grabbing you by the ear and calling your parents.

But keeping people ?honest??comes at the same time as Canada Bread was handed a $50 million fine after pleading guilty to fixing wholesale bread prices.

Nice.

Canada Bread admitted that it arranged with its competitor, Weston Foods (Canada) Inc., to increase prices for various bagged and sliced bread products, such as sandwich bread, hot dog buns and rolls. The price-fixing resulted in two price increases, one in 2007 and one in 2011.

The guilty plea is the result of an ongoing investigation by the Competition Bureau into alleged price-fixing between producers to raise wholesale bread prices, as well as alleged price-fixing between grocery stores to raise retail prices.

The record fine for Canada Bread is a significant milestone in the Bureau's ongoing investigation.

The Bureau continues to investigate alleged price-fixing by other companies, including Metro Inc., Sobeys Inc., Walmart Canada Corporation, Giant Tiger Stores Limited, and Maple Leaf Foods Inc.

?Fixing the price of bread ? a food staple of Canadian households ? was a serious criminal offence. Our continuing investigation remains a top priority. We are doing everything in our power to pursue those who engage in price-fixing,? said Matthew Boswell, Commissioner of Competition.

During the course of its ongoing investigation, the Bureau has executed search warrants against Canada Bread, Weston, Loblaw, Metro, Sobeys, Walmart Canada, Giant Tiger, Overwaitea Food Group Limited, and Maple Leaf Foods Inc.

So, here's the picture:?Large grocery chains making record profits, cheat customers and then try to catch them stealing. If it wasn't true, it would be laughable.

There was a time when the customer was always right. There was respect, courtesy and high levels of customer service.

Today, store staff has been cut, in favour of self-checkout. Products are slow to reappear on shelves, and in some cases, inventory is backordered, or non-existent.

My wife went into a grocery store that sells beer, and the cashier actually told her she could not purchase it because it was ?overstock.??What does that mean??It's on the shelf, with a price and label. That one really dumbfounded us.

There was a time when ?sir??and ?ma'am? were terms of respect. Now they are accusatory, like ?sir??you can't stand there, or ?ma'am? you have too many items in your buggy.

Bags have disappeared from most stores so consumers are forced to bring their own reusable ones. Okay, there is rationale behind this move, but let's not forget that someone is making money on these very same bags (dare I say the grocery store chains themselves). And, how many times have you forgot your bags, forced to purchase more on your way out of the store?

How many of our parents and grandparents would be shaking their heads at current grocery prices??How many would turn to churning their own butter?

We are living in a climate of questionable cost increases; hidden practices; fewer perks; less customer service, and a lack of trust. We are greeted by shifty stares by sales associates as we finish our ?amazing shopping experience.?

It's sad to say, but if current economic trends continue, we're headed for an ?everyone for themselves??society.

When society breaks down and the riots begin, I'll pass on the bread products!