

GRAND OPENING

by Emily Pritchard Cary

One of the grandest of the Grand Openings was abruptly halted on Friday, April 11, 1975, at approximately 4:30 P.M., when an uncooperative component in a freshly installed Bunker Ramo Electronic Store Information System ceased operation.

The resulting pandemonium cast Mike Madonna, manager of the spanking new Shop-Rite Super Market in Springfield, New Jersey, into an unenvied starring role heretofore played only in recurring nightmares.

This nightmare, peculiar to supermarket managers, is heralded by a vision of the store crammed with customers, their shopping carts filled to overflowing in anticipation of the upcoming weekend. The clerks at the check-out counters are handling the throngs with customary efficiency. Suddenly, an inexplicable malfunction in the computer-based registers halts all operations.

Within minutes, chaos prevails.irate shoppers, each intent on immediate attention, become restless, then belligerent, ultimately storming the aisles. The nightmare soars to a climax so hideous that the store manager awakens—screaming—in cold terror, fancying himself merely inches from the wrath of a lynch mob.

What happened when that nightmare slipped across the gossamer barrier which transformed it into reality?

Let me begin where I began, armed with an empty cart, a wallet wadded with crisp bills, a lucrative assortment of clipped coupons redeemable only during the Grand Opening Weekend, and a heart happy in the knowledge that both employees and mechanical complexities therein would mold my turn around the store into a memorable event.

“It’s bad enough being trapped in a Grand Opening mob, but it’s an absolute crime to be kept prisoner by a broken-down machine.”

It was!

Police officers were on hand to direct cars feeding from the highway into the parking lot which already was jam-packed. Inside, a bevy of official caps bobbed among the milling bodies, helping to steer foot and cart traffic through the aisles.

I decided to work systematically, beginning my forage on the far side in fresh produce. Despite the crowds and the difficulty in propelling my shopping cart with any semblance of speed, I did not feel inhibited. Clerks in the delicatessen, seafood, and fresh meats departments hustled through their chores, servicing each customer with dispatch. When one customer preceding me down the aisle was momentarily stymied by a blockade of carts ahead, she mused, “The crush is dreadful today, but it shouldn’t be so bad in a few weeks when things settle down.”

Her companion observed the energy of the check-out clerks responding to the rush of business. “Don’t worry,” she consoled. “Once we reach the counter, they’ll whisk us right through!”

Admittedly, the entire process absorbed double the usual time, but much of the delay could be attributed to unfamiliarity with the shelf arrangements, the small children underfoot who were actively in pursuit of balloon-distributing clowns, and the gaggle of company representatives proffering product samples at several key intersections.

I rounded the final aisle wealthier by a number of freebies, secure in the knowledge that the endeavor had been rewarding.

A cursory glance at the ten check-out counters revealed some delay. I would have to wait my turn behind at least six other shoppers with carts piled high. I opted, therefore, for the nearest slot. As I edged my groaning cart into place, the woman ahead spun around and glared, fury peppering her countenance. What had I done wrong?

Studying customers in other lines, I realized that all wore venomous expressions. No longer were the clerks at the check-out stations herding the orders along with the alacrity and spirit exhibited earlier. Instead, all ten of them—together with their accompanying baggers—stood doggedly still, arms folded. A pervading silence further verified that something was amiss.

Whispers trickled back from the front of the store. As they spread to a steady murmur, I detected a lethal word flitting from one counter to another: “Strike!”

The word bounced back and forth several times, swelling to a roar like a cyclone building momentum. An elderly woman nudged me, ominously, “They’ve gone on strike!”

I did not know if she spoke the truth, but the mass inactivity up ahead deemed it a likely possibility.

A man behind me overheard her. “Good God!” he shouted. “Let’s get out of here. There’s liable to be violence.”

So saying, he grabbed his wife by the elbow and steered her to the door. “But . . . but . . . what about our groceries?” she protested. “Our cart is full.”

“Forget it,” he growled. “There’ll be plenty of trouble here in a little while. We don’t want to get involved.”

Once outside, he confronted potential customers, alerting them to the situation. The recipients of his bad tidings froze in their tracks, stared—disbelieving—through the huge plate glass windows at the motionless mob, then wheeled about and returned to their cars.



The ability to develop, troubleshoot, and maintain hardware and software is a must, as is the ability to speak (or at least listen) intelligently about pertinent matters on a consultation basis. And again, due to the very nature of our product, user community support is of utmost importance. The public must understand or feel that they will be given the chance to understand. We offer, for example, free introductory classes (both hardware and software) to the purchasers of our units, with only a nominal charge to non-purchasers. For the do-it-yourselfer, an hour (at least) each evening is set aside for him to bring in his under-the-weather Altair and get free troubleshooting. Other community functions include the active support of the local microcomputer hobbyist club, one of the largest of its kind in the nation. We also have gained the reputation as being a local depository of technical computer-related brochures and publications. Keeping abreast of the latest price changes and new product offerings is necessary for our survival.

INITIAL EXPERIENCE

October and November of 1975 were spent building and furnishing the store. During this period, we noticed a faint quickening of the public pulse at the shopping center where we are located. More and more people stopped by to talk and find out what type of place this was going to be. In November we were already working out of a half-finished store front. Finally, after months of preparation, we opened the doors on December 20, 1975. Since then the experiences have been truly remarkable. We have run the gamut from uproarious laughter to the utter frustration that seems destined to accompany any business operation. Problems? They occur by the dozens. Basically, however, they can be classified into one of two areas; either problems that are common to all small businesses, or problems unique to computer stores.

The largest obstacle we have had to overcome is our own lack of business experience. Initially this didn't seem too important, but since then we evolved our own form of Murphy's Law: If something can be done wrong—we will do it wrong; and just to be sure, we'll do it wrong two different ways. We have certainly not been immune from the various small ailments that plague small businesses — lack of management expertise, supply problems, cash flow, bad checks, you name it. At times these daily problems seem to outweigh and overwhelm everything else, causing us to occasionally have to reach down deep and rely on a certain humor to see us through. One of our pet diversions is coining "Anti-Slogans" that seem to fit the mood. We have a few classics, such as:

"Progress — We Sneer At The Term"
"Problems Are Our Most Important Product"
"Where Concepts Become Confusion-And Confusion Becomes A Way Of Life."

The other issues with which we deal are those unique to computer stores. First, there is the basic task of letting people know what we're trying to do. To the average person who walks in off the street, we usually have to tell them that even though they can be used as such, we're not selling calculators. Then we have to expect two stock questions, "What kind of place is this?", and "Well, what can you do with these computers?"

At first we would stammer around trying to pull together good answers, but by now it's practically a conditioned response. We hear one of these questions and bang! Put the old mind into AUTO and crank up the song and dance routine. I mean, we've got it down pat!

To characterize our typical customer is impossible. Applications range from monitoring water levels in the depths of a sewer, to writing payroll checks, to controlling a

model railroad in someone's basement. Users include extremely sophisticated systems programmers as well as complete computer novices. Actually, it's less frustrating dealing with a complete novice who is somewhat awed by computers than it is to deal with an IBM 370 programmer who views microcomputers as "Toys." When this happens (and it does happen), we just take them in our computer room and show the business system on which we perform our accounting and inventory control (Altair 8800A, 40K of memory, dual disk units, video terminal and printer, all built into a custom desk). It's almost frightening when you think it's all based on a \$30.00 microprocessor.

Our biggest miscalculation seems to have been just how much time is required by the computer novice. We tend to forget just how much there is to know about computers until we try to explain things to someone who thinks that a terminal is actually the computer. We've literally spent hours passionately pleading the case of Microcomputers to someone only to hear "Well, I'm really only in here killing time while my wife is shopping."

And the joys of Kit-building. Ah, there's a story in itself. Someone buys a Kit, puts it together overnight, it doesn't work, he screams, and brings it in muttering "damn crappy equipment." Usually, the next thing we hear is "What do you mean, bad solder joints? I went to the NASA soldering school." Still, we have a certain obligation to help each customer get his system up and running. We've tried to accomplish this by setting aside a certain time each day, (6:00-7:00PM), during which we have a free software and hardware clinic. During this time anyone can bring in their sick machines and/or programs and we'll give them a hand.

The latest issue we've had to deal with is the "software vacuum." People are discovering that after the machine is working, the real uses are just beginning. Canned programs are fine (programs written and debugged by someone else), but when it comes to writing one's own programs — well, there's more to software than meets the eye. To combat this situation, we have started a series of programming lectures entitled, *The Art Of Creative Computer Programming.* This series is aimed at providing a novice programmer with insights about programming and a set of software tools and tricks to tackle his own programming project.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE

In a year's time computer stores have evolved from a few timid, rather speculative ventures to a firmly established concept. The first generation of stores are highly individualized with each having a different emphasis. In filling out the scorecard on ourselves, I would have to say that we set some very idealistic, but unrealistic, goals. But, there's no substitute for experience, and even with somewhat altered goals, our enthusiasm and energy still runs high.

What about the overall industry? The approaches offered by the differing stores are quite varied. At one extreme is the store that attempts to act primarily as a computer supermarket, emphasizing a broad assortment of equipment for the customer. The other extreme is taken by stores that emphasize primarily their service and support. Of course, this is actually a continuum. As computers become easier to use, as the general public becomes more aware, and as the software vacuum is filled, the tendency will be to move towards the supermarket concept. In these early stages, however, education, service, and installing consumer confidence must be paramount to all other considerations.

Would we do it over again? You can bet your solid-state bippies that we would. Each of our successes, whether a simple home computer or an intricate industrial system, causes feelings of pleasure and accomplishment. The dream of readily available computer power is now becoming a reality and we are sharing, and hopefully helping, in the transition.

A lady paralleling me in line took an alternative stand. "I've been through strikes before, and I learned that you have to hold your ground. It must be something about working conditions. The clerks don't look very happy, but they're bound to clear it up in a few minutes. The manager can't afford to lose all these customers. It took me two hours to load up my basket, and I'm not about to leave and start all over somewhere else. You'll see. They'll get this strike over within fifteen minutes, or I don't know what I'm talking about."

"Since you don't plan to leave," I said, "I wonder if you would save my place while I try to find out what the real story is."

"Sure 'nuff," she agreed. "We're not going any place very fast. I'll be here when you get back."

Within minutes, chaos prevails. Irate shoppers, each intent on immediate attention, become restless, then belligerent, ultimately storming the aisles.

Already the strike theory had spread, and one could sense the fear and frustration enveloping the customers. The choice was heady. Was it better to wait for an incalculable stretch of time, or to leave and forfeit the goods that had been a challenge to amass?

I inched toward the main entrance. A policeman there appeared to be the only person communicating verbally with the public. "Is it true the clerks have gone on strike?" I asked him.

"Wow!" He threw back his head and roared. "Did you hear that one? They think you're on strike," he told the nearest clerk.

"Who started that rumor?" the clerk asked, stupified.

"Some of the customers," I replied. "If you're not on strike, then what is the matter? Why aren't the check-out lines moving?"

"The computer broke down. Damn thing just up and quit. Can't do a thing with the registers until someone comes to fix it."

This struck me as being a severer problem than a strike. At least a hike in salary could mollify an unhappy employee, but what can be done about a cantankerous computer if there is no knowledgeable repairman on tap?

"How long will it be before someone gets here, and where are they coming from?" I asked.

"Who knows?" another employee shrugged. "Just hang in there."

Hang in? And for how long? I decided to query the service desk.

Three girls huddled together behind it in vague fear. They knew little about what had happened and nothing about what could be done to remedy matters. "Oh dear, oh dear. What can we do?" one muttered. "Look at the mob in the aisles!"

Addressing another girl, I asked, "Is your manager in the store at the moment?"

"Is he in the store? He'd better be, that's all I can say, or we'll all go crazy!"

The third girl, slightly more composed, suggested that he would be on the upper level where the computer held forth. "But you're not allowed up there," she remarked, defensively.

I sensed that she suspected I might try to storm the computer—or attack the manager—or perpetrate a violent act of the sort befitting a berserk customer.

"I have no intention of going up after him," I assured

her. "I'm just pleased to learn the source of the difficulty. I'll go back now to report to the customers. They are becoming angry."

There was no denying their churlish deportment. Sporadic chants demanding immediate service swelled to a steady throb.

It was push and shove back to my shopping cart. All along the way, I cried out to as many customers as would heed my words that the strike rumor had been erroneous. "There is no strike," I repeated, over and over. "There is no strike. It's just the computer."

My words mollified some of the more belligerent customers who consented, reluctantly, to grant me passing room.

Upon locating my cart, I discovered that my message had advanced faster than I had. "Don't worry," the woman saving my place assured me, "they say it's just a computer. There is no strike."

"Just the computer!" a nearby man hollered. "Who're you kidding? That's an impossible mess! You don't get computers repaired for days, sometimes weeks. Probably the company is headquartered some crazy place—like Texas! That would be just our luck!"

That tore it! The rumor erupted, inviting anger to billow forth as word ricocheted around the store that the computer had blown up and would have to be replaced. A new one being shipped from Texas would not arrive for at least a week.

The mob surged forward. Or was it merely pressure amassed from shoppers queuing up behind us?

By now, all of the aisles facing the check-out counters were packed solid to the rear of the store with customers, their shopping carts laden with food. Surely thousands of dollars were at stake. Each person demanded immediate attention, computer or no. Hadn't the flyers received in the mail, the newspaper ads, and the gala banners strewn across the facade of the building promised super service?

These people let it be known they had not driven all the way from Elizabeth, Glen Rock, Ho-Ho-Kus, and Heaven-Knows-Where to be done in by a microscopic computer component.

"So get a cash register!" someone yelled.

"Cash register? Phooey! Get a hand calculator!" another suggested, in an unkind manner.

"Whatsa matter?" a more practical man boomed. "Ain't youse never heard of addin' wit' paper?"

"Good God!" he shouted. "Let's get out of here. There's liable to be violence."

A small child up ahead screamed with fury as the mob drove him into a magazine rack. "Gun shots!" someone gasped.

A sharp, metallic edge had popped the child's huge balloon bearing a slogan suggesting strict allegiance to Shop-Rite Super Markets.

In retaliation for his loss, the boy kicked his mother, who responded in kind by slapping him smartly and yelling for all nearby to hear, "Shut up, you fool kid! It's those jerks behind me who ain't got no manners! Quit your shovin'!"

The child screamed bitterly, but his cries were drowned by the drone of dissatisfied customers. Many among us were becoming edgy toward our adjacent fellow man with whom we were presently congregated for no reason other than we had elected to patronize the Grand Opening on this fateful Friday afternoon.

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Suddenly, the loud speaker commanded our attention. "All Shop-Rite specialists to the front of the store! I repeat: all Shop-Rite specialists to the front of the store!"

It took some doing for the specialists to reach their goal. Nobody in line was about to relinquish his place despite the plea, "Coming through, please, coming through." The specialists endeavored to assure the agitated shoppers that it would be to their ultimate advantage to step aside.

I recognized them as the product representatives who earlier had been supervising the stock boys stacking the rapidly emptying shelves. All were garbed in business suits, conservative ties, and deep frowns. They appeared to be out of their element in the role of cashier which they assumed presently.

Other employees shoved through the crowds and tapped those whose carts contained ten items or less. These lucky ones were advised, "Take your selections to the liquor department."

The liquor department cash register was not wired to the unfortunate computer system; smaller orders could be handled there. This proved to be token assistance, as most shoppers had stocked up for the week, but at least some in the crowd would be dismissed promptly. One man, overlooked for transfer to the liquor counter, tugged at an employee's sleeve. "Hey, buddy, How about me?"

The employee surveyed the cart, then relented, "O.K. Go ahead. You have only fourteen items."

An elderly lady near me, prim and genteel of mien, had six selections in her cart. "You can be waited on at the liquor counter," I prodded her, believing she had not understood the directive.

"Never!" she retorted. She was adamant. "You'll not catch me near a drop of liquor!" Doggedly, she stood her ground behind eight carts brimming with groceries.

Ugly dispositions began to flare. A pugilistic man far to the rear of our line took exception to the liquor counter decision. Why should customers with small quantities be serviced and the rest penalized? Mouthing his protest in X-Rated terms, he rammed his heavy cart into the person in front of him. The chain reaction of cart into flesh reached me moments later, resulting in a raw heel and a run in my stockings. By the time all the victims in our line consolidated their ire, the culprit had melted into the mob.

Another chain reaction erupted as a wave of furious customers abandoned their carts willy-nilly and stormed out the doors. En route, they verbalized their resentment for the indignities being thrust upon them. Several enjoined the rest of us to follow suit. "Let's show the management we mean business," one agitator cried.

A few more stoic customers were embarrassed by the actions of the rash ones, and a girl asked me to guard her place in line while she did the very least she could do as a concerned citizen: return the meats and frozen foods in the abandoned carts to their proper counters.

The compassionate girl need not have worried about losing her place at the checkout, for we were in the identical spot when she returned. The customers who remained—and there were dozens, even hundreds—seemed resigned to waiting out the ordeal. However, most

made it vivid to everyone within earshot that they had no intention of revisiting the premises. One man put it succinctly: "It's bad enough being trapped in a Grand Opening mob, but it's an absolute crime to be kept prisoner by a broken-down machine."

He vowed to scrutinize henceforth each market he enters to make certain it features "... good, old-fashioned cash registers." These, he pointed out, might individually cease operation on a whim, but odds are they will not *all* go on the blink at once.

Several husband and wife duos began bickering as to whose idea it had been to shop at this store. One man accused his wife of being unable to resist a Sale, and she retorted that if he were not such a poor provider she would not be forced to buy at Sales and Grand Openings in order to live within his lousy salary.

Numerous epithets were noised abroad, all hinting darkly of conspiracy in high places, infiltration of the Mafia into the computer industry, and a secret move afoot to subdue the public. The general consensus was that computer programming is the initial step toward the dehumanization of mankind, and if we submit to its authority, it will be no time before the communists who design and manufacture computers invade our private dwellings and spy on personal activities.

One man, gifted with sonorous delivery, decried the implementation of computers in any capacity and spewed his hatred equally between computers which seldom operate properly to those which soon will be planted covertly on our very persons. His captive audience tended to concur with his prophecy, although their bewildered faces clearly reflected a failure to trace his blustery line of reasoning.

Up ahead, two adding machines, newly located, had been moved into position at two counters. Computation at the other eight aisles would be done by pencil and paper. In short, third grade arithmetic was rushed to our rescue.

Hope soared when a computer specialist arrived on the premises, but he promptly reported that the problem hovered within the jurisdiction of an electrician. It was anybody's guess when one would arrive.

No matter, I detected a faintly perceptible forward motion of our line. The child whose balloon had been demolished was still whimpering, but his mother buoyed him with hope. "They're moving along now. See, the man is adding up the groceries with his crayon. Hush! Maybe we'll get out of here some time tonight." Then, more sternly, "If you don't shut up, the man won't let you out of here!"

Inch by inch, item by item, we battled our way to the counter as the Shop-Rite specialists patiently added column upon column of figures. Sometime after 6:00 P.M., my order was tallied and packed snugly in eight brown bags.

Mayhem persisted throughout the Grand Opening weekend, my neighbor reported, despite the fact that three registers returned to service late Friday evening. I shall not belabor her adventures in the store except to report that she is convinced the world will arrive at a stand-still soon thanks to hysteria born of malfunctioning computers.

Today the Springfield Shop-Rite Super Market basks in the glory of an operational automated check-out system, but one cannot help speculating when and where the public will be treated to the next nightmare sparked by a capricious computer gremlin.

An editor read this story and commented, "How clever, it sounds almost real" The reason it sounds real is because it actually happened and every detail in this account is absolutely true.