

Shopping When You Can't

by Steve Hansen

Going shopping is a problem for many people with environmental illness. The web offers all sorts of shopping, though it is not accessible to those who are too sensitive to use a computer. There are mail order catalogs, but the cost of shipping adds up, and sometimes we just need little things, like a pencil refill or a photocopy.

Some of us have to rely on other people to bring our groceries and do not have a spouse or partner. Friendly neighbors, friends and fellow EIs can be a big help, but one's welcome can be worn out. Sometimes outside help is needed.

Some people have an agreement with a store that one of their employees will fill the order at less-busy times of the day. They may charge a small fee, or do it for free. The order is then picked up by a volunteer, or sent with a taxi.

Using bulk purchases through food co-ops can cut down on a-la-carte trips dramatically, which has many benefits. Our area is served by a food co-op which serves several states and comes with a big truck every four weeks. I buy at least 80% of my food that way, which was possible after I invested in a freezer. Since orders have to be placed about two weeks ahead of time, I need to plan six weeks out. That can seem overwhelming, but is not, with some routine and a willingness to plan ahead. The order can usually be placed through a local contact person or by phone or fax, or computer.

The shopper can be sent to pick up the order at the delivery point, or another co-op member may be willing to do it. I simply host the delivery here at my house, which also provides some socialization.

Getting most of the grocery needs covered by bulk purchases makes it easier to organize the far fewer and simpler shopping runs. The lists are shorter and the errors and omissions fewer, besides probably being a lot cheaper.

Some of us here also buy organic produce from another co-op, which does not deliver and is over a hundred miles away. We have hired a local retired man, who drives down there every two weeks. We then share the cost of the trip, which is cheaper than driving yourself. He first picks up a cooler from each of us, which he then returns with our order. Our orders are phoned in in advance, so he just needs to pick them up.

With all this in place, I only need to send someone to town with a shopping list about three times a month. And it's usually a short list, which may include errands, such as taking photocopies or mailing a package at the post office.

I make a separate 8-1/2 x 5-1/2 sheet of paper for each location the shopper is to go. At the top, I write the name of the location, so there can be no doubt. It is very important to make things simple and rule out any doubt. The shopper probably does not have the same frame of mind to make judgment calls, and may also be distracted with other things and interests. The list has to

be clear, easily legible and in large print. The number to buy of each item must be shown prominently.

If no substitutions can be accepted, and only organic will do, write it so. The shopper will learn such rules pretty quickly, but they are best stated in writing at the start.

I try to list the items together, as they appear in the store: i.e., frozen things together, household items together, etc.

Spending the effort to make the list easy to use is well worth the effort in saved money and frustrations over missing items, wrong items, or only one item bought when two were listed.

Buying staples or specific items, like a "windup timer" is usually easy. Sometimes I need to see the choices to weigh price, features, etc. For instance, choosing a toaster oven could be done by having the shopper write down the models, and then look them up on the web (or ask a friend to do that). Another way is to give the shopper some specific criteria, and ask him to buy two or three different ones. Then keep one and return the others on the next shopping run. Catalog and Internet purchases are other options. Finally, every few months, I do make it to town and eyeball the items on the list that I keep.

Some stores do not stock special items all the time, but will make a special order if called some days in advance. They can be quite helpful, especially when I explain I have to hire people to get me stuff.

Patience is needed, and to be able to accept that what was bought is not always what was really wanted. Things happen. It is a different person making the final purchasing decision, after all. I've had a shopper not buy a particular vegetable on the list, because the store was out of another kind that, in his mind, went with it, in his cooking. Another time, he didn't buy an item, because the store had none of the other things on the list. Somehow, he'd rather come back empty-handed, for some reason I never understood. He was trying to be helpful, not malicious.

At the start of each trip, the shopper comes to my house to pick up a cooler and the shopping list. I have never tried dictating the list over the phone, but I'm sure it would create more errors.

One shopper I used simply paid for all the purchases, and then I reimbursed him with a check. Another one is simply given a check in advance, which he cashes in town. He then gives me the leftover money as cash, which is helpful when there is no ATM nearby.

The best help is often found by word of mouth, especially from other EIs in the area. Other resources are to contact any local independent living centers, retirement homes, agencies supplying handicap transport or other organizations that deal with the handicapped. Some churches may also help. It is not just EIs who have a need for help.

In many rural areas, some local guy makes a little extra money driving people around and might be willing to pick up some things when he is driving people to shop at Wal-Mart or Safeway, and may be willing to stop at Whole Foods. By "doubling up" this way, he can offer a lower price for the service and still come out ahead, so both sides benefit from the arrangement.

Other people are just willing to bring things along for a fee, when they go shopping anyway.

This kind of work is not well paid, and people may not last very long, so keep an eye out for a replacement or at least know people who can step in temporarily. The type of people who may be interested in this sort of arrangement are often retired folks or people with some disability. Their health may change or their priorities. The little income they get from doing shopping will not be holding them.

If friends or volunteers provide services, it is nice to show appreciation once in awhile with a thank-you card or a small gift certificate.

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