

Communal queuing systems: do the advantages outweigh the negatives ?

COMMUNAL, SNAKE, or bollard queuing systems. Call them what you will, but they are making sense to an increasing number of store operators. So much so, that it's surprising that they are not yet completely in the mainstream!

Store designer Leon Freislich says that many retailers still resist communal queue systems when planning new stores or doing revamps. The major perceived disadvantages stopping the widespread adoption of communal queues are:

- ◆ That you lose gondola space when converting to communal queue checkouts.
- ◆ That shoppers, especially those coming in for just a few items, are put off shopping when they see a long queue.
- ◆ That they are not suited to large, month-end pantry loading supermarkets.

Despite this, communal queues are standard to Woolworths, Dis-Chem and Makro stores. Shopping at Woolworths and Dis-Chem can be characterised as mostly

small basket transactions, but often with long queues at peak periods. Yet the long queues have not caused them to revert to conventional checkouts. Nor has Makro, which has a proportionally big share of the pantry loading shopping business.

These perceived disadvantages can be real. But it turns out they can often be minimised or avoided altogether. Or they may result in minor sacrifices in order to gain much bigger benefits.

Take the issue of lost gondola merchandising space. Depending on the width and depth of the store, the consensus is that in converting to a communal queue checkout system, the gondolas will be shorter by one, or perhaps two drops, and at worst, three. But that loss can be transferred into high impulse merchandising space on the communal queue.

Also in question is the kind of space that may have been taken up by conventional checkout merchandising units. Not only do they take up space, but they are highly

inefficient in that you can only present a portion of the possible impulse range at any one checkout.

And so a radical rethink of the checkout and the use of space - as seen at Rosmead Superspar in Cape Town (opposite page) - might even save space.

A much fairer system

The main benefits that everyone we spoke to mentioned are that communal queues are without doubt a 'much fairer and more equitable way of processing customers through the tills'; and that they eliminate a huge amount of stress from the shopping experience.

So there is a trade-off that has to be made. On the one hand, communal queues give every customer their fair turn at the checkouts so they do not wait a moment longer than is fair, every time they shop. And with this, the stress of making the wrong choice and paying for it is eliminated. On the other hand, doing this will result in

A big bonus. Communal queue merchandising can up sales dramatically. And, not just for confectionery and magazines, but for a much wider range of impulse products. It allows every shopper to see the full range and find their favourite indulgence.





Space saving? Rosmead Superspar in Kenilworth Cape Town. This double bank system uses just half of the store front for its 16 communal queue checkouts. The right hand bank lines up against the store's front wall. The central passage effectively halves the conventional passage behind the checkouts and makes the checkout area more compact to supervise.

driving some casual shoppers away. But this may not be as big a loss as it may seem as busy conventional checkout stores can also put these shoppers off.

The fact is that even supermarket business professionals aren't smarter shoppers when it comes to choosing the fastest conventional checkout. No one can predict that the shopper in front will pull out 40 accounts to be paid; that their card won't process; or that a product won't scan. It's very seldom that any shopper succeeds in selecting the fast queue. And when they do, the chances are that they won't find their favourite treat at that checkout!

Other key advantages of communal queues include:

- ◆ It kills sweethearting almost stone dead.
- ◆ It dramatically increases impulse sales as well as the range that customers are exposed to.
- ◆ It speeds up processing customers through the checkouts.
- ◆ It improves cashier productivity.
- ◆ It protects hot products against shrinkage.
- ◆ It enables you to schedule cashiers more effectively.
- ◆ It creates a better vibe among cashiers and makes them happier.

Supermarket & Retailer spoke to industry executives, store owners and managers to get their views, experiences and management insights on communal queue

systems. Their stories follow:

Spar North Rand

Mario Santana worked in store development for years and is now operations director for the Spar North Rand DC.

He says communal queues definitely take up more space. The amount of space they take up is dependent on the number of checkouts and the width of the store. On average you would have to take away two or three drops. The more checkouts there are; the less space is lost per checkout.

Among the advantages he sees for communal queues is that they are faster for shoppers. Cashier productivity is better because the workload is shared evenly. In conventional checkout stores the first two and the last checkout in the store are usually the busiest. The cashiers at the other checkouts serve fewer customers. And once in a queue, customers are reluctant to jump to a shorter or even empty queue. Someone else may jump in front of them while they switch, or the till may be closed when they get there.

He likes the communal queue set up at Dis-Chem Fourways, Johannesburg, where he says they have done a great job, "You do not even know that you are queuing - you are so busy looking at their product range and the magazines."

However, he has reservations about communal queues for Spar stores. "We are in the convenience game and my first

thought when I see a communal queue is that it will take long to get out." That, he says, could put him off going into the store in the first place. "The problem is the perception of the customers, especially those coming in for just two or three items." But he acknowledges that consumers are getting used to communal queues and that communal queues result in massive increases in countline sales.

Newton Park Superspar, PE

Alasia Moutziz, owner of Newton Park Superspar, does not believe that communal checkouts take that much more space; especially when one takes into account the space taken by conventional checkout merchandising units. "They take away perhaps a metre of space," she says.

She has also seen some small stores put in communal queues in a limited amount of space by being creative and using bank type queue bollards. "If I could, I'd move my whole store into the communal checkout queue merchandising." That, she says, would be a recipe for huge sales increases..

The range at the Newton Park checkouts is a lot bigger than just count lines. She includes speciality sweets and biscuits on promotion, chips, dried fruit, biltong, magazines, cold drinks in a fridge, and more, and she introduces new snack lines there. She repeats the layout so that shoppers are tempted again and again.

When Moutziz opened the store 10

years ago, she opened with communal queuing against the advice of the Spar store development team.

No negatives

For her there are no negatives. It stops sweethearting, she says, as shoppers can never plan which cashier they will end up at. The store has 12 checkouts which are continuously manned. So the queue is never static and it generally moves very fast.

She does not feel that shoppers wanting to buy one or two items are put off because the queue may look long. Moutmtzis believes that the shoppers know the system and they know that the queue moves fast. In fact, the communal queue works so well that they took out the express checkouts. "Customers become more relaxed as they learn that the queue move fast," she adds.

Her daughter, Nerissa Walton, who operates



Newton Park Superspar, Port Elizabeth, opened with a communal queue system 10 years ago. They have just revamped it and eliminated their separate express tills. Now, there is just one queue. "Why encourage customers to buy less to make the express queue?", they ask. They sell more confectionery here than in the aisle.

Fig Tree Spar, recently converted to a communal queuing system. Within the first six weeks, sales of magazines had increased by 11% and confectionery by 10%.

Sofia Holland, also at Newton Park Superspar, has a Woolworths background and through that, she has extensive experience in communal queues. She



WHO'S REALLY FLYING THE FLAG FOR THERMAL RIBBONS?

With our fourth slitter already installed, we're certainly waving the Thermal Transfer Ribbon flag proudly. In fact this now makes us one of the biggest suppliers of the best low energy static free ribbons in South Africa. We will supply ribbons of any length or width at a competitive price to suit all your printing needs. Kemtek supplies a range of ribbons i.e. wax, premium wax, premium wax resin, premium resin, tech and coloured ribbons.



DEALER ENQUIRIES WELCOME • NATIONAL: 0861 KEMTEK • JHB: +27 (0)11 624 8000 • PTA: +27 (0)12 804 1410
 DBN: +27 (0)31 700 9363 • CPT: +27 (0)21 521 9600 • www.kemtek.co.za

reckons they provide a better service for customers. "They wait less in a communal queue," she says.

She also sees it as a better alternative to express tills for hand baskets or 10 and less items. Not only do express checkouts not work well, she says, but they also encourage customers to buy fewer items to qualify for the queue. Even then they are seldom satisfied with the speed of service at express checkouts.

Express checkouts – an old idea

"Express checkouts are an old idea that no longer works," she says. "Most customers shop more frequently today and buy fewer items. In fact, most do not purchase more than seven items."

Holland says there are other advantages to communal queues. For example, instead of keeping six tills open in quieter periods in a conventional checkout supermarket, you can give the same perceived level of service with four cashiers in a communal queue set-up. That's because shoppers don't look at the number of tills open to judge good service in a communal queue supermarket. Instead they look at how fast the queue is moving.

At Newton Park, they've found that service is actually better in a communal queue. At peak trading periods in the store, their customers don't wait longer than three minutes for a checkout. At the same time, communal queuing makes it easier to plan staffing on the basis of historic customer shopping.

Communal merchandising advantages

There are also merchandising advantages for communal queue systems. Each customer can be exposed to a much wider variety of merchandise in communal queues than at a conventional checkout. At Newton Park they sell more confectionery at their communal queue than they do from the regular confectionery run.

One of their interesting experiences is merchandising razor blades and batteries in the communal queue. The shrinkage on these high shrinkage items did not increase and remains in the 1% - 1.8% range.

Holland believes that the reason for this is that shoplifters do not feel comfortable with the concentration of shoppers in the queue and the pace of the queue – they can't check if they are being watched. Battery sales did not suffer when they stopped merchandising them in the gondola run. Batteries for most shoppers are not a browsing category – mostly they know which battery they need. Putting batteries on the outside of the communal queue gives them the protection of lots of shoppers moving to the checkouts, as well as a bit more room for those customers who need to browse.

Problems with kids

Kids performing in the communal checkout queue have not been a problem at Newton Park Superspar, though Holland thinks it could be a problem in wealthy areas, or where kids are spoilt. When we spoke to her it was six weeks since they had revamped their communal queue system from version one which had not been ideal. She says she had not received a single complaint from customers, but had received many compliments. Many customers like it because of the convenience – they could find their favourite treat without having to go to the confectionery aisle or to a specific

FROM INNOVATION . . . TO DREAM CREATION

As South Africa's premier shopfitting specialists, StoreWorks provides a turnkey service.

An experienced and vibrant design team, manufacturing facilities and quality installation all combine to provide you with an exciting new venture or complete professional revamp.

From gondola shelving and racking systems to custom made counters, checkouts, bulkheads or specialised merchandising units, we provide you with a comprehensive service you can rely on.

StoreWorks operates nationally and undertakes projects throughout Southern Africa.



StoreWorks
• Store Design • Development • Fitting

Tel: +27 11 613 3839 Fax: +27 11 613 3808
20 Brunel road Tullisa Park Johannesburg
e-mail: harvey@storeworks.co.za website: www.storeworks.co.za

CALL US NOW FOR YOUR ONE STOP SHOPFITTING, SHELVING AND RACKING NEEDS.

Subscribe
to your
favourite
retail
magazine
today.
Contact
Yashik
Maharaj
on

(011) 728-7006



Fig Tree Spar, Port Elizabeth, has just converted to a communal queue. Sales of magazines increased 11% and confectionery 10% within the first six weeks.

checkout that stocked it.

At Newton Park there is no bell or talking moving sign to alert customers to the next open till. Their cashiers put up their hand and call 'next customer, please'. It is a much more competitive environment for cashiers, she says, as they share the workload more evenly which helps to create a much better vibe. "Customers also have less stress. You can see them looking at the merchandise and not at the progress of the queue."

Jaques van Wyngaard, manager at Newton Park Superspar, says that if a cashier at a conventional checkout has a problem that holds up the process, then all the customers in that queue are disadvantaged and get annoyed. In a communal queue system that does not happen. The customers seamlessly route in turn to the other checkouts. He also notes that communal queues can spur cashiers to work faster. At their busy times they station a manager or supervisor at the head of the queue to play traffic cop and direct the customers to the tills – and this puts pressure on the cashiers to speed up.

Makro

There is still a lot of reservation expressed about communal queues in big trolley pantry loading stores. Yet Makro, which has a very large pantry loading retail customer base, was one of the first to switch. That was about eight years ago and they are not

looking back; nor are their customers.

Colin Cocking, then a Massmart project manager, drove the process. He recalls they were looking for more efficient ways of getting customers through the tills and to putting an end to sweethearting. So the question came up, 'How do you split shoppers up so there was no certainty of which cashier would process a customer's purchases.' The idea of the communal, or snake queue, as Massmart calls them, evolved from there.

There was a big question around the logistics in a situation where you often had customers with very full trolleys and some customers with three or four trolleys. They had to keep the queue moving, and to do this they had to speed up the cashier and packing procedure.

No blocked aisles

Previously at busy periods the queues at the conventional checkout would back up into the aisles; and so effectively cut their selling space. The snake queue removed them from blocking the aisles, even though the queue could, especially at store openings, wrap itself around the store to the extent where customers at the tail of the queue could not see the checkouts. Even so, the customers were getting out of the store much quicker.

So they had a big selling job to do on customers, especially those who were



Electronic displays are often used to direct customers to the next available checkout. However human intervention at the head of the queue in busy times can speed things up. The right person can also interact with customers and improve the shopping experience.

attracted to the store openings. Lots of shoppers took one look at the queue and abandoned their trolleys. So Makro measured the time it was taking to get from the back of the queue to the checkouts and told customers at the back of the queue the time it would take and offered them a discount if it took longer.

Initially they did a lot of PR work with their customers in the stores. They installed

what they called a 'snake charmer' at the head of the snake to ask shoppers coming through about their shopping experience and to direct them to the next available cashier. People who were good at this made a big difference to the shopping experience and in getting customers comfortable with the new system.

Express checkouts

Cocking recalls that one of their debates was whether to retain express tills or not. They decided against it as their aim was to encourage bulk shopping in their stores. Also, express tills create a lot of unnecessary aggravation when customers who don't qualify, barge in. While this is something that managers should handle, it often gets dumped on the cashiers.

The fact that Makro was able to eliminate some of their tills after switching while doing the same volume of business shows that communal queues are more efficient. That's despite the fact that there is a delay between a cashier finalising a transaction and the next customer arriving at her till.

Delay to next transaction

The fact is that there can be quite a delay between a cashier completing one transaction and starting the next, especially for cashiers farthest away from the head of



Experience suggests that high risk items like batteries, razor blades and sweeteners can be openly merchandised, safely, in communal queues with minimum shrinkage.

the queue. One thing that can be done is to put one's best cashiers closer to the head of the queue as they can process customers faster, and the less experienced cashiers farthest away, giving them time to regroup between customers.

Initially it was the snake charmers job to watch and send customers to the cashiers. Now they do it with an electronic board and the cashiers signal for the next

350mm wide units

saves space

merchandising both sides

custom designed for your store

euroshelf[®]

For more information on how we can solve your queueing needs call us at 0861-11-3680 or visit www.euroshelf.com



PnP Family, Morningside, is the second store in the group to have a full communal queue checkout system. It concentrates on popular confectionery lines and magazines. Higher priced, more gift type confectionery is kept on an end near the start of the queue to allow more browsing. This view is from the managers pulpit.

customer. But this can be slow. One reason is that many cashiers rearrange their cash drawers or checkout desk before signalling. The ideal would be for the till to signal for the next customer as soon as a transaction is completed.

A holistic approach is needed to see where things can be speeded up at busy times, Cocking emphasises. This can include employing more packers or roving packers at peak times.

Looking back, he says the snake queue

project was one of the most exciting times in his career at Massmart. It was not only hard to sell the concept to customers, the directors were also sceptical. But now no one would think of doing things differently.

Freislich Design Consultants

Leon Freislich's experience is that in converting from conventional checkouts to communal queues in a medium sized supermarket, one drop is lost on the gondolas facing the new checkouts. In some cases you

may even lose two drops. However, this is more a shift of display space as this loss is compensated for by the merchandising space created along the queue.

Many retailers resist communal queue systems when planning new stores and doing revamps, he notes. The main objection is that shoppers looking into a store and seeing a long queue may well decide not to shop it. They don't look at how fast the queue moves.

Originally Freislich resisted the communal queue idea. Since then he has changed his mind to a large extent, especially when he saw stores increase their confectionery sales by 30%. Now he recommends it for stores of less than 1,000 square metres. For larger stores he is not as convinced.

However, he relates a case where the first reaction of experienced retail clients who recently acquired a large communal queue system supermarket was to convert the system to conventional checkouts. The clients then decided to first wait till they had settled into the store. They soon realised that there was almost a complete absence of sweethearting incidents, and they decided

Morningside Pick n Pay uses a new checkout design that allows customers flexibility in docking shopping trolleys and unpacking purchases. The checkouts have been kept free of all merchandise except for airtime starter packs.





Good use for the backs of the communal merchandising units. Morningside displays all their long-life carrier bags in close reach of customers at the checkouts.

to retain the communal queue.

Pick n Pay

Pick n Pay's first foray into a full communal queue checkout system was at their Daily franchise convenience supermarket concept store at the World Wear Centre near Roodepoort, Johannesburg.

The communal, or snake queue, as they call it, was a good lesson, says Johan Hattingh, project manager in the Gauteng Franchise Division. It was something they wanted to do again. That opportunity came with the Pick n Pay Outspan Family store which recently opened in Rivonia Road in Morningside, Johannesburg.

It was something that Ivan Diepraam, a long serving Pick n Pay executive now turned franchisee, wanted and specified for the store. It is also something his business partner and former Pick n Pay sustainable development executive, Tessa Chamberlain, says she would not open a store without. After years of motivating the concept internally, the move to franchise has been her opportunity to put the communal

queue system into practice.

Hattingh does not believe that there has been a real space sacrifice in installing the communal queue at the store. In fact space is at a premium as the store is a bit smaller than they prefer for a Family Supermarket. What they have essentially done is to take the store's 'rewards aisle' (confectionery and snacks), located last in the shopping trip, and moved it to the communal queue. The metres are almost the same, though the low profile queue merchandising units force you to work more cleverly, he notes.

Chamberlain believes that if there has been any loss of space it is more than compensated for at busy times by removing the queues that clog up the aisles and prevent easy movement as well as shopping from the gondolas.

The Outspan store's introduction of the snake queue was also their opportunity to make other changes at the checkout. The checkout units themselves are of a new design that gives customers more flexibility in the way they align their trolleys to the checkout counters to unload them.

High Performance, Good Looking

EPOXY AND POLYURETHANE FLOORING SYSTEMS

Ideal for warehouse, factory
and supermarkets including
all food prep areas



titanium
Floors

Contact Terence Mangold on 083 254 5647
Or visit our website www.titaniumfloors.co.za



OFF SITE CCTV MONITORING

An eye for the future

SPECIALIZING IN

- ◆ Access control
- ◆ Burglar Alarm System
- ◆ CCTV Systems
- ◆ Electric Fencing
- ◆ Off site CCTV Monitoring



011 432 6050

**NOW
ALSO AVAILABLE
DELUXE MODEL WITH 30% BASKETS**

INTRODUCING THE FLEXI-SHOPPER®

- THE COMPACT SHOPPER WITH BIG FEATURES

The new three basket Flexi-Shopper® is specially designed for the customer that enjoys the convenience of basket shopping but needs more than the standard two basket trolley offers.



The first basket trolley with a parcel shelf.

- Can be used as:
 - A 3-basket trolley, or
 - A 2-basket trolley, with a parcel shelf.
- Top two baskets are immediately accessible.
- Can nest with or without baskets
- Baskets can be attached permanently to avoid theft.
- Incorporates the ergonomic "pistol-grip" handle.
- Provides superior stability, due to structural design, and 100mm Ø wheels.



NESTS WITH BASKETS

Catapult CGSR008

HEAD OFFICE - CAPE TOWN:
Tel: +27 (21) 937 7123
e-mail: dsales@capegate.co.za
DURBAN: Tel: +27 (31) 709 2670
PORT ELIZABETH: Tel: +27 (41) 486 2538
BLOEMFONTEIN: Tel: +27 (51) 435 2081
JOHANNESBURG: Tel: +27 (11) 483 8500
GEORGE: Tel: +27 (44) 874 3736/7
www.cape-gate.co.za

RSA Design Registration:
A2005/1397, A2005/1398



SMOOTH OPERATOR



Where do you keep cigarettes? There's a toss-up between customer convenience, space and stock control. Rosmead Superspar (above) duplicates them at every checkout for shopper convenience. PnP Family, Morningside, has a separate kiosk, near the entrance and next to the checkouts, which is convenient for people just coming in for cigarettes (the store is in a shopping centre).

The move was also Chamberlain's chance to clean up the checkouts. They have gotten rid of all merchandising with the exception of airtime starter packs. This includes the reusable shopping bags that were cluttering the checkouts, and which are now displayed on the back of the snake queue merchandising units that face the checkouts.

The store has stuck with popular confectionery lines in the snake queue – a high impulse area where consumers know

what their favourite is. The higher priced and more gift-type confectionery is merchandised on a gondola end near the entrance to the snake queue as they believe these are items that customers want to browse before making their choice.

Chamberlain says that 99.9% of customers are happy with the system. "Our only problem now is that sometimes the queue just moves too fast for those shoppers who might want to browse!" ■