

Latest trend at the grocery store? Never set foot inside

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George Tyler selects grocery items requested by a customer using the Super 1 Smart Click program at Super 1 Foods in Kalispell on May 10. (Casey Kreider/Daily Inter Lake)



George Tyler delivers a Super 1 Smart Click order at Super 1 Foods in Kalispell.



George Tyler places items from a Super 1 Smart Click order into a bin for a customer at Super 1 Foods in Kalispell on Thursday, May 10. (Casey Kreider/Daily Inter Lake)

In recent months, national and regional grocery supermarkets with grocery locations in the Flathead Valley have embarked on the next stage in the ongoing metamorphosis of their industry: online ordering and curbside pickup.

Shoppers in the Flathead Valley can now use the new option at Smith's in Kalispell, Super 1 Foods in Kalispell and Whitefish and Harvest Foods in Bigfork.

In the new arrangement, customers go on the store's website and browse virtual shelves, much like they do when they shop for books or electronics from any e-commerce merchant.

The websites offer the ability to peruse the store's weekly advertisement and put things in their virtual cart simply by clicking on the interactive digital version.

Upon checking out, customers can select a pickup time for either late that day or later in the week. They are also prompted to apply any digital coupons they may have, and then pay with a credit or debit card similar to any other online transaction.

After that, all the patron has to do is drive to the grocery store. At Smith's, there are four designated spots for "clicklist pickup." Each has a sign with a phone number to call. The person at the other end asks your name, and then an attendant brings your groceries straight to your car.

The attendant will go over the customer's list, letting them know if anything was out of stock and taken off the bill, then puts the groceries in the car and the shopper can go about their day.

Nora Phillips is the e-commerce supervisor at the Kalispell Smith's store. She said they have been running their click-list program since early October 2017, and it has been a big hit with customers.

She said it has been particularly popular among parents with small children that can make traditional shopping stressful and also with older folks who can still drive but have a hard time walking around and carrying heavy items for long periods of time.

Phillips has a staff of six workers specifically tasked with filling online orders and delivering the goods to people's cars when they come. She said the biggest hurdle was getting everyone trained, but after a winter that saw varied levels of interest, business is picking up.

She said one of the biggest benefits to the program is that employees can better look out for the customers. People might relinquish the ability to pick their own produce or select meats from the show cases, but Phillips said if customers order something name-brand that is out of stock, the staff will take that off their tab and add a Kroger brand product free of charge. That's a benefit that shoppers in the store won't get, she said.

She also said customers can insert messages with their orders to retain some of that control they might be concerned about giving up. She said customers who want to avoid extra plastic bags can express that, and they can even accommodate people who would like to drop off tote

bags in advance for the workers to use.

George Tyler runs the program at Super 1 Foods in Kalispell. He said many of his first-time customers are wary of letting other people pick out their produce, but once they overcome that hurdle, they love the new service.

“I tell them, ‘you give me one chance, if I don’t pick it right I’ll buy it back,’” Tyler said. “It has been getting bigger and bigger. Right now my average is around \$3,300 a week in sales. My goal is to get as many [customers] as I can.”

He also pointed out that customers can dictate what acceptable substitutes would be if something is out of stock when they fill out their online order. He personally calls or texts customers when he makes substitutions he has questions about, and that personalized attention is appreciated by his customers.

A manager at Harvest Foods in Bigfork said the store just began its online shopping program at the beginning of May, spurred on by Smith’s and Super 1 Foods service.

The new shopping option is simply the latest in bids by grocery chains to keep shoppers coming to them rather than breaking rank and buying more and more of their household’s groceries from other retailers.

In a 2017 report, the Hartman Group Inc., a Bellevue, Washington-based consumer research firm, showed that only 47 percent of consumers said they bought most of their groceries from one primary supermarket, down from 61 percent a decade earlier. The statistic was cited in a Wall Street Journal report on the tactics grocery chains are taking to stay ahead of one another.

In urban areas, grocery chains are also trying to keep consumers from shifting their grocery shopping to online e-commerce giants such as Amazon, which sometimes offer home delivery. In growing markets like the Flathead Valley, the competition comes from other large grocery chains and locally owned shopping options.

Online shopping also offers an opportunity for the grocery store to collect more accurate data on the consumer preferences on an individual level, which they can then use to target and retain them.

There are some distinctions that separate the programs available locally at Smith’s and Super 1 Foods.

On the Super 1 online shopping program, which the company calls “Rosie,” customers can designate a list of their favorite items so it automatically shows up at the top of the queue when shoppers go to put together their next shopping cart.

There is another option in both stores’ online platforms to pick from a selection of recipes, the ingredients for which will then be automatically placed in the shopper’s online cart.

Smith’s does not currently allow customers to purchase alcohol or tobacco through its curbside

pickup service, but Super 1 does. The website asks you to enter your age when you begin the shopping experience to help keep the service from being abused by underage consumers, similar to when someone goes to the website of an alcohol manufacturer on a standard web browser. Tyler said they also get IDs at the time of pickup for purchases that include alcohol.

Super 1 also has a \$30 order minimum. Smith's currently has no order minimum.

At Smith's in Kalispell, the first three times a customer uses the service is free. After that, a fee of around \$5 will be charged. At Super 1 in Kalispell and Whitefish, a \$5 fee is levied even for first-time users. The service isn't offered at the Columbia Falls Super 1 location.

More information about the Smith's Clicklist program can be found at <https://www.smithsfoodanddrug.com/>. More information about the Super 1 Smart Click program can be found at <https://www.super1foods.net/online-shopping/>. The Bigfork Harvest Foods program can be found at <https://www.bigforkclicknpick.com>.

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