

When Did the Front of Supermarkets Become Solicitation Central?

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The bell ringing. The red kettle. The Salvation Army volunteers in warm woolen coats.

I smile, thinking how this used to signal the start of the holiday season. I couldn't wait to drop some coins in the kettle.

The Girl Scouts have ruined that.

Let me explain. Except for The Salvation Army at Christmas, the Lions Club at Veterans Day and every so often a voter registration drive, the only things that used to stand between you and the entrance to the grocery store were shopping carts.

All that has changed. Going to the grocery store now is like preparing for battle. Pick a season, any season. You've got Girl Scouts selling cookies, Boy Scouts selling wreaths and Campfire Girls selling chocolate. The daily newspapers have started selling subscriptions.

Add halfway houses, band camps, PETA, NRA and ARF — all asking for donations — and you need a covert operation just to get a gallon of milk.

And that's only outside the store.

Once inside, your shopping completed, you still have to make it through the checkout stand, which is starting to resemble airport security with all the questions.

"Would you like to donate to *fill in the blank*?" the cashier asks.

"No, thank you, not today."

I slide my card through the machine and before I sign, there's a message on the screen: "Would you like to donate to *fill in the blank*?"

Didn't the cashier just ask me that? Fearing that if I refuse again, the store manager will come over and ask me the *same* question, I decide to mark "yes." Had I known the cashier would announce my donation over the loudspeaker, I would have checked "no" and taken my chances with the manager.

Really, who among us hasn't taken the change we just got back at the checkout stand and dropped all of it into the pink-ribbon jar? I can't think of a single person I know who doesn't donate to someone or something. I know how fortunate I am, and like you, I give what I can.

Open your mail on any given day and you've got St. Jude, Jerry Lewis and Father Flanagan greeting you. Turn on your television and you're asked to give to Hope for Haiti or Stand Up 2 Cancer. You happily sponsor your friends who ride 600 miles for AIDS or walk three days for breast cancer.

And there's still money left to buy wrapping paper and magazine subscriptions from your co-worker's kid. We buy tickets to events that raise money for a deserving cause, and we bid on auction items, silent or otherwise, to help make sure our favorite nonprofit never turns anyone away.

Which brings us back to the grocery store.

When did the front of the supermarket turn into solicitation central? No matter how polite I am to an individual or group that bombards me to give, sign or buy something, I feel like the bad guy. And I feel even worse for the person one of these solicitors cornered just before me, whom I later see using food stamps to buy groceries.

Last spring, I was one step away from the entrance of a local store--and feeling rather smug that I had managed to avoid eye contact with any of the solicitors. Just when I thought it was safe to go in, someone asked me to sign a petition for *fill in the blank*.

On the way out, the same guy asked me to sign the same petition. I stopped, smiled and very tongue in cheek, said, "You asked me on my way in and now you're asking me on my way out. You can't do both, so make up your mind."

He said: "What do you want from me, lady? I'm stoned."

Every one of us is feeling the pinch from the economy -- especially nonprofits and schools. Maybe I'm naïve in thinking that we all give what we can and if we had Warren Buffet or Oprah's money we'd give even more to every organization that asked for a donation.

But, there has to be a better way than opening up shop outside of every shop. What started out as a sweet holiday tradition with one bell ringer and a red kettle in front of the store has turned into an orchestrated, year-round intrusion.

Ah, back into battle I must go. I'm out of milk to go with all the Girl Scout cookies I still have in the freezer.