

Opinion | I went to Costco in the age of coronavirus. Here's what it was like

Brian Bradley

I went shopping at Costco in the height of COVID-19 anxiety on Friday.

I wasn't trying to prove anything and I believe in the science of self-isolation. But I didn't shop much before the grocery shelves were left barren by the panic buying last week.

So, out of necessities — like bread and fruit — I decided to venture out to restock my cupboards at a local market — to offer support — and at Costco to check out the safety measures I heard were put in place.

The fate of small and large businesses, independent and corporately-owned, has been on my mind since Premier Doug Ford declared a state of emergency and many operations in Ontario were closed. I was once a retail and restaurant manager who closely counted results on a profit and loss statement each month. I agonized over numbers then. I couldn't imagine what it would be like now.

So I ventured out to my local farmer's market to get a few items. I kept safety in mind. I put on a mask and filled a bag with items I wanted. The vendor, anxious for a sale, inspected it without touching and took payment wearing gloves. At another vendor, I paid with debit card and used the tap function, avoiding contact. I was never closer than three feet to any person.

Feeling more confident that social distancing was possible, I headed to Costco with my membership card-carrying mom in tow.

It was apparent the shopping experience was going to be different as soon as we arrived at our local Ancaster, Ont. location. The front entrance was blocked off with shopping carts. Two employees and two police officers directed us to a line.

Customers were required to take a cart, increasing the social distance between us as we waited, and given wipes to clean our hands and the cart handles. We were allowed into the store in waves to keep order and prevent crowding around cashiers. No one could enter until someone had left.

"It will be sparse inside but we want a safe shopping experience," a worker directing foot traffic told me.

Once inside, another employee inspected my mom's membership card — from a distance without touching it — and gestured to a sign that outlined what was not in stock. It included Lysol wipes, toilet paper, gloves, soft soap and Tylenol.

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Good to know. I wish businesses did that all the time.

The shoppers went separate ways from there, increasing the distance between each other and obviously conscious of respecting the space. Almost everyone headed to the food department which appeared to be well stocked (minus the previously mentioned items). Most shoppers did not wear masks or gloves.

The other aisles — clothing, furniture, home decor items, etc. — were pretty much void of shoppers. Some nonfood departments were closed, including jewelry, mobile phones and the hearing aid centre. It made sense. You can't get fitted for a watch or a hearing aid without close contact.

There were no food hoarders or “hustlers” buying everything available as there had been last week when coronavirus and closure fears soared.

It appeared like almost any other day. Although I did notice customers were choosing packaged items over prepared foods.

And there were orange pylons along one aisle creating space for a lineup for paper products. Toilet paper (when in stock) and paper towels were kept behind caution tape. A worker dispensed one item per person.

I was surprised the small Costco food court was open, though the menu was limited and seating had been removed. Condiments were prepackaged and cups had lids and sealed straws. The membership desk and return counter was also open, which seemed risky to me.

I didn't see many people talk to each other, though everyone was cordial. When I asked different workers questions, they all maintained a respectable distance. I was a little touched by one person. He clearly took pride in how the modified operation was unfolding.

My mom and I headed for a cashier 30 minutes after we arrived. To increase space between customers and workers, only every other register was open and workers were on hand to direct traffic. While the usual help was available, the employees wore gloves, would not touch membership cards and we had to bag our own groceries, which we were asked to do outside the store.

At the exit, where customers normally line up to have purchases inspected, we were waved through and directed to more wipes.

The visit was quick and efficient. I am not a health professional, but both my mom and I felt safe doing our shopping and that we had not put ourselves at risk.

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