

Let's Play Twenty Questions

Prepared by Matthew Toellner – The Resilient Grocer Project

Purpose of this Document

The purpose of this document is to encourage grocery employees to use judgment and observation at checkout rather than relying on a scripted series of questions. When employees are trained to ask the same questions of every customer, interactions can become robotic, and customers notice. The goal is to train employees to **read the customer, not the script**. Employees should use verbal and non-verbal cues to determine when conversation is welcome and which questions actually need to be asked.

The Usual Questions

Common questions incorporated into grocery checkout scripts include:

- “How are you today?”
- “Did you find everything you were looking for?”
- “Paper or plastic?”
- “Do you have a loyalty/rewards card?”
- “Would you like these items bagged separately?”
- “Would you like to donate [amount] to [charity]?”
- “Would you like your receipt?”

None of these questions is inherently bad. The problem is treating them as mandatory.

Read the Customer

Customers don't necessarily want to answer a series of questions, particularly when they're making a small purchase or are clearly in a hurry. They often communicate this without saying a word.

Employees should pay attention to:

- Eye contact and facial expressions
- Body posture and movement
- Whether the customer initiates conversation
- Whether responses are brief or conversational
- Whether the customer appears rushed, distracted, or disengaged

Not every question needs to be asked. Sometimes the best approach is simply to make a reasonable decision and let the customer speak up if they prefer something different. For example, rather than asking “Paper or plastic?” every time, the employee can choose a bag. If the customer wants the other option, they'll usually let you know.

Train Employees to Recognize Cues, Not Recite Questions

A customer who wants a quick checkout should get one. A customer who wants to chat should have an employee willing to engage. Both are examples of good customer service. Excessive scripting can make employees sound robotic and customers feel processed rather than served. Give employees the flexibility to vary their greeting, limit unnecessary questions, and respond naturally to the person in front of them.