AdMerica

It was the easiest job I'd ever had, and I was terrible at it.

I'd drive to a supermarket late at night, find the unused shopping carts, pull out an old advertisement from the shopping cart frame—Triscuits, or Coca-Cola, or Hellmann's mayonnaise. Then, I'd grab a shiny new ad, slide the new ad into the frame, repeat.

Pull and slide. Pull and slide.

My route consisted of about a dozen supermarkets. It took a couple of hours to swap out ads at each store. Every four weeks a new cycle began.

I always wondered if customers even paid attention to these ads. I sure didn't. I've always been a grab-and-go shopper, ignoring Goya's brightly colored cart propaganda screaming for me to buy chickpeas. But food companies love to advertise, to spend money to make money. So for years, I

kept pulling and sliding.

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I had been out of work for a year-and-a-half, and I'd exhausted my unemployment benefits. I was scared to look at my bank account online. I struck out at job interviews for online ad sales and with a rent-to-own retail shop. I knew I was desperate when I found myself looking for jobs on Craigslist. There, I stumbled upon a job posting where the only requirements were a driver's license, reliable transportation, and a computer.

Five hours after responding to the post, I received an email with an application attached. Once I sent it back, another email ordered me to show up for an interview at a Price Chopper

supermarket, and to look for someone with glasses and a name badge that says Shopping Cart Kat.

I underestimated how long it'd take to find this supermarket and when I pulled into the parking lot at The Chopper five minutes late, I thought my poor planning had already blown the interview. As I scurried toward the front entrance, I resigned myself to more Craigslist searches when someone jolted me out of my panic.

"Are you Scott?" she asked.

She was wearing a name badge from AdMerica Marketing that said Shopping Cart Kat, standing with another new prospective hire named Rae-Ann, who'd had the good sense to arrive on time. Kat went over AdMerica's expectations for us—most importantly, how to install the ads. Kat showed us how to do it, then handed us a few ads to try.

Rae-Ann pulled and slid like she'd been doing this for years. I struggled. I can't even change a tire. I almost failed wood shop class in middle school. And every time I tried to jam the ads into these frames, they fell into the carriage. This wasn't just a learning curve; it was a learning parabola. Eventually, with some extra coaching by Kat (and Rae-Ann), I got the hang of it.

Kat assigned me a route of twelve stores—Stop & Shops, Shaw's and Price Chopper supermarkets in the Worcester area. Not a great paying job—a dime above minimum wage—but brainless work. And it was something. I needed something. I wasn't sure I could pay June rent.

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The day after my meeting with Kat, Price Chopper called me. A few weeks earlier I'd filled out a generic application with The Chopper. Someone named Paige informed me that they were opening a new store in Hopkinton and looking to hire for all departments. After going over

my resume, they offered me a full-time job with them as a front-end supervisor—overseeing the cashiers and keeping the checkout lines running smoothly.

In the span of 48 hours, I'd secured one part-time and one full-time job. I took them both because I had to. Even a supervisory position at The Chopper paid only a dollar above minimum wage.

A few days later I found myself at Price Chopper orientation, listening to Paige discuss the do's and don'ts of working for them. One of the "don'ts" she described was moonlighting for a company that Price Chopper has a vendor or third-party relationship with. Paige said The Chopper considered that a potential conflict of interest. I asked myself if this would force me to quit AdMerica before I even began. Then I put it out of my mind. The Hopkinton Chopper wasn't part of my AdMerica route. I was assigned only two Choppers, one in Worcester, the other in Marlboro. I was jolted from my internal strategy session when Paige informed me that, until the Hopkinton store opens, I'd be training for a month at the Marlboro store.

Shit. If I had to, I'd give up AdMerica, because it's only part time. But I really needed both jobs.

I was determined to find a way to make this work. I had to get through one ad-change cycle during my month-long training in Marlboro. I swapped out the ads in Marlboro at 2am, because the Marlboro Chopper was a 24-hour supermarket. Perfect. Nobody really knew me yet except for Ashley, Marlboro's no-nonsense front-end supervisor. I managed to stay on her good side, which was important because Ashley was ex-Air Force and didn't take shit from anyone. Supposedly the store had recently busted a bad-check-cashing scheme because of Ashley's hawk-like observation of the perps' behavior. Luckily, Ashley didn't work overnights. By 4am,

the sun was peeking over the horizon and I was in my car, screeching out of the parking lot as if I'd robbed a bank.

A couple of nights later, I headed over to the Chopper store in Worcester, also open 24 hours. At this store, the carts were kept in a cramped outdoor vestibule, and I had to perform cart gymnastics to reach the way-back carriages. By 3:30am I was almost finished, working in the back of the vestibule, when a voice startled me.

"What are you doing?"

I looked up to see Ashley, staring at me like I was trying to pass a bad check at Register 12. There was no easy explanation for what I was doing. After a few awkward moments, I decided the best course of action was to tell enough of the truth without putting either of my jobs at risk.

"I'm…uhh…swapping out the ads," I said.

I could sense the wheels churning in Ashley's head: *Is Scott really swapping out ads, or is this some sort of sketchy criminal enterprise?*

"So, you work at this store, too?" she asked.

"Yeah," It wasn't a lie, though I worked at this Price Chopper for AdMerica, not Price Chopper.

After a few beats, Ashley said, "Makes sense. They've always had a tough time staffing this store. And then you get more hours."

I tried to misdirect. "Do you work at this store too?"

"No, but I live right up the street, so if I find myself needing something late at night it's convenient. I'm out of milk."

"Gotta have your milk." I hate milk.

"See? You get it. Well, I'll see you tomorrow."

I dodged a bullet. By the next ad-change cycle, I'd be working in Hopkinton. It would've been awkward checking in with Ashley every month to ask if she was low on milk.

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Every month, AdMerica sent me boxes of ads and an email spelling out which ads went in which stores, and I spent time at each store swapping out the old ads for new ones. There were always twists.

I got the call early one ad-change cycle. It was Shopping Cart Kat. She sounded panicky. Rae-Ann had abruptly quit.

Rae-Ann covered the Fall River area, on the South Coast of Massachusetts.

"Scott, do you have any extra ads?" Kat asked.

"Yeah, I have a few," I said.

"Do you think you could do a couple of Fall River stores this cycle?" she asked.

Fall River, colloquially referred to as "The Riv," is a typical small-to medium-sized northeastern city. It was nearly an hour-and-a-half drive from me—so far away that it was easier to get there by driving through Rhode Island and then back into Massachusetts. I didn't really know Fall River. I'd heard stories. My friend Erin grew up in The Riv and said she'd occasionally witnessed carjackings and shootings.

I told Kat, "I'll do it."

I wanted to be doing anything else. But money and mileage reimbursement were hard to turn down. So, I stuffed boxes full of ads and cart frames; Kat told me that this store needed frames installed because a lot of carts didn't have them. Installing a bunch of frames meant I

could claim more hours and get extra pay. The frames were huge. I put fourteen boxes of them in my PT Cruiser, which was now so stuffed it looked as if I was moving.

It's impossible to get to Fall River without hitting traffic somewhere along the way. I headed out during afternoon rush, to get the traffic apocalypse part of my journey out of the way early. I got to The Riv at 6 and did my thing. I parked in as well-lit a place as possible, grabbed my boxes, worked in one store, and then the next.

Funny thing about those Fall River stores—the ads on all the carts were ancient. I could tell from the ad codes that some of them pre-dated my time at AdMerica. Missing a cart here and there was inevitable. Some of them were in use by customers, some of them were kept out back in employee-only areas. But most of the ads were several years old. This also created more work. Each month some ads would be holdovers from previous cycles and didn't need to be swapped out, but here I was removing ads that dated back to the Jurassic Period. And adding frames to the carts doubled the workload. It was almost like Rae-Ann wasn't doing her job.

I slogged through the drudgery by thinking about how much the extra money would help me catch up on bills. Mission accomplished. I got back in my car and left The Riv behind in a trail of dust, getting home sometime after midnight, and then stole a few hours of sleep before my next front-end shift at The Chopper.

Shopping Cart Kat learned to rely on me. She'd randomly audit a couple of my stores to make sure I was doing the work, which probably explained what happened to Rae-Ann in Fall River. At times, I picked up a few extra nearby stores, because Rae-Ann wasn't the only cart rep who quit on AdMerica. It was a common theme. AdMerica needed warm bodies, and a lot of warm bodies were students who only wanted a summer job. They'd arrive in May and quit in

August. Even the more traditional cart reps were worn down by the job in the winter months. Nobody wanted to do this job when many of the carts were covered in snow in outdoor corrals.

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Things got weird the month my PT Cruiser broke down. By then I'd left Price Chopper to take a job as an assistant manager at a convenience store for slightly more money an hour, but not enough of a raise to fix a brake job without paying down debt on my maxed-out credit card first. I lived within walking distance to the store, so even with a car out of commission I could still punch in for each shift. But it killed any chances of completing the ad-change for this month.

I called Kat and gave her the bad news.

"Don't worry, we'll figure something out," she said. I'd filled in for Rae-Ann and other reps; it was only fair for them to return the favor. I hated missing out on a pay cycle, though.

The Friday after the cycle ended, I forced myself to check my bank account online to see how broke I was. I was surprised. I had more money than I expected. A direct deposit in my bank account from AdMerica had posted for the amount I'd normally make during ad-change week.

I never asked Kat about it. I assumed they'd take it out of my next paycheck. They never did. When I returned to ad-change duty the following month, none of the new ads were installed. It was like Kat paid me not to work.

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A couple of months later, Kat was promoted to take over AdMerica regional operations for the West Coast. She was in her 60s and exhausted with New England winters. Over the next few months, I went through a succession of area managers. First there was Stacy, who forgot to order my ads for the next cycle. I emailed Stacy that I never received the ads. She never

responded. Then I emailed Tim, Stacy's boss and the equivalent of Kat's new position for Greater Boston.

He must've contacted Stacy, because shortly afterwards she fired off an email to me.

"You had a mandatory training a long time ago and you should be printing your own work orders and completing your own data entry and payroll. Please make sure you have your ad change completed by 9:00pm on Thursday."

This had absolutely nothing to do with the ads, which I still didn't have. I responded to her email. I also cc'd Tim.

"Simply put, Stacy, your communication skills leave a lot to be desired. It takes three days for you to respond to my questions, if you respond at all.

"I never had these problems working with Kat. I understand Kat's been transferred/promoted, but I still expect basic communications skills from whoever succeeds her. I still don't have the blue 'LOW EVERYDAY PRICES' ad for the Hudson store, so I'm in limbo until they find their way to my doorstep."

Tim responds, "Hang tight, Scott! We'll take care of it!" Tim was a lot more like Kat—overwhelmingly positive, with a love for exclamation points. I received the ads a few days later. I never received a response from Stacy.

The next month, Tim sent an email announcing that Stacy had left AdMerica, to be replaced by Mary, who also forgot to send me the ads. She lasted one cycle, before being replaced by Debbie, who for the next couple of months routinely sent me desperate, cry-for-help emails asking if I could take on more stores because more reps were quitting. Our routes were supposed to comprise ten to twelve supermarkets. At one point in Debbie's tenure, I had twenty-

two stores on my route., and had to space them out over two weeks because AdMerica wouldn't pay overtime.

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Outside of AdMerica, I was promoted to convenience store manager. With the increased pay came increased responsibility, increased stress, and—since I was salaried now—increased hours. I was probably making enough to get by without AdMerica. I was paying off credit card debt. But I remembered how broke I was for years. During one long period of unemployment, my car got repossessed. I didn't want to go back to that life. I'd continue to fill in for other cart reps' stores, only to find out those reps weren't doing their jobs. Dealing with Kat was easy. Dealing with her incompetent successors, not so much.

Meanwhile, staffing was so low that Debbie was doing some of the ad changes herself in the Fall River area, which mean she had no time to audit any of my stores. One of my Price Choppers underwent a redesign and switched to a different style of shopping cart, one in which my normal cart frames didn't fit. I emailed Debbie on three separate occasions to ask if she could send me the other type of frames. She never responded.

I started to think about that one cycle when Kat paid me for not working.

I started to get ideas.

It started out small the first month. Half-assing it at the bigger stores. *I don't have time to do the carts on the other side of the store*, I'd tell myself. The next month it graduated into blowing off a couple of my stores entirely. But I still claimed hours as if I completed both stores. Nobody questioned me. Soon I only worked two or three stores on my route, out of fourteen. And not putting much effort into those couple of stores.

I knew I couldn't keep this up. It was wrong. After each cycle I thought about quitting. Each month, just when I was about to give my notice, Debbie sent me another desperate email. Right after Thanksgiving, I received a holiday present from her—a $20 scratch ticket in the mail.

That month I also moved to Lancaster, a small town north of Worcester. My new apartment was in a remote part of town that didn't have mail delivery, so I had to rent a post office box. Debbie told me they'd send the boxes of ads to their warehouse in Leominster, one town over.

The holidays came and went. In January I received an email from Debbie. "Can you please give me a call?"

I dialed her up. "Hi Debbie, what's going on?"

"Your ads are still at the warehouse," Debbie said.

I knew I'd get caught eventually. "What?" I said, acting incredulous. "I received ads right before I moved."

"Those were probably December's ads," she said. I offered no response. "Shit," she continued, "That means you probably put the wrong ads in the carriages."

"Shit." Echoing her concerns seemed like the best approach.

"Just make sure it gets fixed this month. It's potentially a big problem."

In the three years since I started at AdMerica, I'd moved into an apartment of my own and hadn't missed a car payment. I still couldn't absorb a large, unexpected expense, but I earned enough to get by. I definitely hadn't always been the best employee at any of my past jobs. But I'd also never been fired from a job before. I wasn't going to start now.

I still half-assed February's ad-change. I only did two out of fourteen stores—one had a local ad from a real estate agent. The other was centrally located in Worcester. If Debbie was gonna audit any two stores, it'd be those two.

I returned a few hours later and dusted off an email and sent it Debbie.

"Ad-change complete. Thanks for your patience.

I regret to inform you that I am resigning. It's become unrealistic to try to balance my day job's workload with ad-change, particularly since my recent move has taken me farther away from most of my stores.

I appreciate the opportunity to work at AdMerica, and wish you continued success.

Best,

Scott"

I waited for a response. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. Debbie was terrible at returning emails.

A day later, I received a response from Debbie. "Thank you, Scott, I wish you the best."

Moving to Lancaster was the unraveling of my deceit. It allowed me to be even more lackadaisical by leaving the ads in the warehouse. My AdMerica work became more and more substandard, until it was constituted outright fraud and theft. At my convenience store chain, a manager at another store got fired for selling cigarettes to a 16-year-old. At AdMerica, I exploited the fact that, though I was often assigned to work eighteen to twenty stores, my supervisor was assigned to keep track of a dozen cart reps across New England, while also swapping out ads in a handful of stores herself. I was fortunate to move on with life, with the only consequence being that I acknowledged it was best for me to proactively quit.

After I heard back from Debbie, I emailed Shopping Cart Kat. She and I always had good rapport; we'd even connected on social media. In a reminder of the happier, early days of my time at AdMerica, Shopping Cart Kat responded almost immediately.

"I don't blame you," she wrote. "I'm retiring in December. I've had enough."

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A month after I received my last direct deposit, I was jolted awake one night by my phone's email notification tone on my nightstand. I took a quick glance at my screen and noticed it was from AdMerica's Human Resources.

I knew I'd gotten off too easily. Now they were about to come after me.

I alternated between staring at the email address, worrying about whether I needed to hire an attorney, and trying to muster up the courage to open the email. The anxiety eventually got to me. I opened the email.

It said, "We've auto-enrolled you in a mandatory compliance course for all cart reps. Failure to complete the course by March 31 will result in your inability to complete future assignments."

I chuckled. I wasn't even on the payroll anymore. This felt pretty on-brand for AdMerica.

I deleted the email, turned over and went back to sleep.