Lights Out at Publix

Why do we need lights on in a grocery store? Those of you who spent more than a few milliseconds on the answer "to see things", please have another cup of coffee.

But let's think about this a bit more. To see what? Well, we certainly need to see where we are in the store in a general sense, including the signs on the aisles telling us where we are and what is stocked on a particular aisle. But what about the lights in the freezer aisles that are behind the glass? The glass is there to allow the minimum cost for keeping frozen foods frozen, but the lights behind the glass....what are they for? To see the food behind the glass! If no one is in the aisle, why does that light need to be on? How much money is spent illuminating something that no one is looking at?

Publix, one of the largest grocery chains in the southeastern US and headquartered in Lakeland, FL has thought about this, and for quite some time now has installed fluorescent bulbs behind the glass that only come on when someone is actually in the aisle. Since this chain is where I do most of my shopping here in Tampa, I asked the store manager about this and she confirmed, but would not quantify, that there were significant cost savings in this type of lighting design.

What simple TRIZ principles does this concept illustrate? All of the separation principles. First, separation in space and parts/whole. The on/off lights only illuminate a particular space within the store. Second, separation upon condition and time. The lights come on only when they are needed. The TRIZ separation principles, separation in time, space, upon condition, and between parts and whole are four of the most powerful inventive concepts that exist.

We often get into a "Six SIgma" rut trying to make everything uniform and when we actually have an optimum solution, that may be the best course, but we always need to question whether we have the "optimum" solution. Time and time again, we see that non-uniformity is the key to breakthrough inventions as documented in the patent literature as well as many new products we see. Look at every system and product design that you have and ask yourself, what if we separated "X" in time, in space, upon condition, or between parts and whole? What innovative thoughts does this thinking provide? What new product concepts come to mind?

Next public TRIZ class is in Las Vegas September 24-26 and a new class has been added in San Diego, November 12-14.

http://www.asme.org/products/courses/triz--the-theory-of-inventive-problem-solving