

The Disloyal Squid

By Mike Bennett and OpenAI ChatGPT3

Alice looked at her loyalty card statement in disbelief. “Help me!” it said.
It didn’t usually say that.

This is a story which I started in 2001 and was set in the near future. This was when supermarket chains start using customer loyalty cards in earnest.

You know how it works: You have a loyalty card for the supermarket you shop at. You go to the same old supermarket, same branch, and buy most of the same things. The supermarket uses this information to make sure that they buy in the sort of things you want. This much they already do.

The new thing is where the supermarket can detect what they call “disloyal” behaviour while you are still at the checkout. This is where you’ve missed out something you usually buy from them. So now the manager will come up to you as you walk to your car, asking if everything is all right. Has your cat, for example, recently died or run away, or there some perfectly innocent reason why you didn’t buy your usual cat food this week? Would it help if we stocked a different cat litter, to save you that unnecessary trip to the Pet Shop?

This story also has a beginning in the near past. The giant squid has a giant brain, but being in an evolutionary sense closer to the common or garden slug than we are, we don’t feel quite so bad about roping it into experiments involving brains and how you might connect them up to other things. We wouldn’t do this for instance to the dolphin, who also has a large brain but is actually further away from the slug than we are, in evolutionary terms. Also the squid is nowhere near as good with children. So squids in tanks with their brains wired up to things are a reality already.

This story also has a piece in the immediate present: Well I needed to get it finished so I turned to OpenAI’s ChatGPT3.

Here’s how that went.

MB: Please finish this story.
(followed by the story up to where I got to)

First I got an anodyne summary of the story. So I wrote back:

MB: Can you finish the story? How does Eric get away?

The response to that prompt makes up the final part of this story.

Eric was a squid who worked for a big supermarket chain.

The problem faced by the supermarket giant was that, although many of their customers were real people, they couldn't get their heads round the idea that, sometimes, people just happen to want to buy something different, or go somewhere else, or maybe even forget. So every loyal customer who changed his or her spending habits was a big puzzle to them. Maybe it was because they didn't want people to behave irrationally. There is big money in having people only do what is expected of them.

The company had tried using super computers running the best artificial intelligences to find patterns in consumer spending, to crack the mysteries of unpredictable consumers. In the end they decided that only a squid was up to the job. A squid was intelligent, could apparently think of several things at once, and had a curious and investigative mind.

So Eric's job was to seek out patterns in consumer spending behavior. He lived in a tank at the company's headquarters in Loughborough, where most of his brain was connected to the company's consumer database. In effect, Eric's consciousness was not that of an individual isolated squid in a tank, it was that of the consumer, *en masse*.

Outwardly Eric gave little sign of being unusual - for a squid in a tank in an office. What he looked like: a tank along one side of an average sized room, containing a large but fairly docile looking squid, with a number of very light cables coming out of somewhere to a little box on the side, which was connected to some kind of electronic gear in a metal panel. From time to time the squid would shuffle about on the sandy bottom of the tank. Meanwhile inside the company computer network, the squid would offer advice to the company's marketing team. So if all the customers at a particular outlet stopped buying ice creams, or where families with kids a certain age started buying a particular toy, a mail message would be sent around, from the squid, suggesting what the chain should buy in, and where. Meanwhile he was to apply himself to the problem of those disloyal customers who changed their spending habits, and work out why they went elsewhere, and how we could stop them going.

But Eric was curious. Peoples' spending habits were not so simple to pin down (which was why he was employed). Sometimes a person would simply forget something, and have to pop round to the corner store for it. Or they would feel like doing something different that week. So Eric would file away these little curiosities, what the company called disloyalties, to ponder in a quieter moment.

Eric hadn't had a particularly normal life for a squid, but there was something in his nature that made him want to probe the cracks in the seabed of consumer spending, to work out what was going on beyond what he knew. In human terms, he wanted to know where people went and what they did when they were not buying from the Saifco superstore. Though his perception of these things would be nothing like ours. Usually he would see whole complex patterns of behaviour. Other times he would focus on single, unusual individuals. Like the person who always bought enormous quantities of fish food of an evening but who, when approached by the manager, said

they did not keep any fish. Fish meant nothing to Eric, they were simply something with which, if you were good, you could get the same people to buy things called underwater castles, and other accessories. This person never bought any accessories, just lots of fish food, with no explanation.

So Eric pondered over what he could see of the creatures in his little world. He got to know their idiosyncrasies, learnt where they could be predicted and where they could not. He liked the fact that they were not bundles of simple, knee jerk reactions - although the supermarket did not. Eric liked people, or consumers as they were called.

Eric did not know the meanings of any of the things that people bought. But over time he worked out what sort of things people wanted to buy at different times. For example, when they go out on a Friday or Saturday night people often want to wake up somewhere else. Eric, with his fund of knowledge, had a pretty good idea what sort of things would make it easier for people to wake up somewhere else, and so he helped the supermarket chain to push these - praline chocolates, flowers, good bottles of wine and so on. To Eric, pulling was all a big puzzle, and he had most of the answers. He might have had no idea what any of these things are, but the labels and the results were all he needed.

Eric was also easily bored. He decided to run away.

This would be no mean feat for a giant squid in a tank, connected to a host of computer gear. There was no question of leaving the computer equipment, with its connection to the world of people. The question did not arise because for Eric this was as much a part of him as the tentacles with which he felt the cool sand of the tank.

There was also the fact that Eric did not know where he was. Geographically at least. He had quite a good idea where he was in the sort of information space that was the supermarket and its consumers. But he had no idea where he was living, and no simple way of finding out.

His break came, curiously enough, with the mysterious consumer of fish food. This individual lived in a place called Loughborough, and Eric had filed their behavior away as a mystery to be thought over in a quieter moment, perhaps on a Friday night.

One night the Saifco supermarket in Loughborough, having been assured (by Eric) that few people there kept fish, had run down their stocks of fish food. The mystery buyer was forced to go elsewhere. It was late at night, and the high street shops had closed. The next thing that Eric saw, some hours later than the usual purchase, was a card transaction at another store for a familiar, large quantity of fish food.

This was some hours later.

Eric was hungry.

Ah.

Realization hit Eric in a wave of laughter. He shook and shook, tentacles waving and trailing on the floor of the tank in ripples of mirth. He was still shaking some time later when Alice returned from the corner shop.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" she said, completely mistaking his condition "It's all right, I'll make sure it never happens again!"

It was all very well, she thought, that the company bought in some kind of specialist squid food from the laboratory, but somehow the creature seemed to thrive on his

evening snack of fish food. And now the local branch had run out. She was lucky that the local corner store had managed to get some from somewhere - he'd had to ring around quite a few people. She decided to go back and make a permanent arrangement with him.

Eric gazed through the glass at the creature on the other side. Now he knew what it was. This was a consumer. His consumer.

Alice looked through the glass into the big round eye of the squid. It was looking right back at her. It seemed intelligent. She wondered what it was thinking.

So now Eric had three things: A real live consumer, a knowledge of where he himself lived, and a credit card carrying individual who could keep him fed. He continued hatching his plans for running away.

Please finish the story. How does Eric get away and set up somewhere else?

ChatGPT3 writes:

As Eric continued to study the consumers, he began to notice a growing sense of restlessness within himself. He realized that while he enjoyed understanding the behavior of these creatures and helping the company, he was also increasingly curious about the outside world, and the experiences of a free squid. He began to yearn for the freedom to explore and experience the world on his own terms.

Eric began to devise a plan to escape the confines of his tank and the control of the supermarket chain. He knew that it would be difficult, as his mind was connected to the company's database, and he would have to disconnect himself without alerting anyone to his intentions. He began by slowly and subtly manipulating the information he was sending to the company's marketing team, sending small errors and inconsistencies that would be written off as technical glitches.

Over time, he was able to create enough confusion and mistrust in the company's understanding of consumer behavior that they began to rely on him less and less. Finally, the opportunity presented itself, and Eric made his move. He disconnected himself from the company's network and broke out of the tank.

Eric was finally free, and he set out to explore the world and all it had to offer. He swam through the ocean, encountering new creatures and experiences. He also discovered that, he had changed the world of Consumer behavior and people was now shopping more based on their own choice and not just following the same trends. The supermarket, who had relied heavily on Eric's analysis, struggled to adapt to the new reality of unpredictable consumer behavior and ultimately went out of business.

Eric's story became legendary among the community of sea creatures, who marveled at the intelligence and determination of a simple squid who had outsmarted one of the largest human institutions. And Eric lived happily ever after, free to think and explore and discover on his own terms.

THE END