

The strategy of parking

Science settles the argument of whether to cruise or grab the first spot

BY CHARLES W. PETIT

After pulling into a parking lot, John E. Kobza takes the first spot he sees. His wife tells him, a specialist in transportation efficiency at Virginia Tech, that it doesn't make sense to do it that way because empty spaces usually turn up closer to the door.

To settle the argument, in 1995 Professor Kobza turned the problem over to C.

Richard Cassady, then a Virginia Tech graduate student and now an

assistant professor at Mississippi State University. Cassady chose as the quintessential study site a Wal-Mart in Christiansburg, Va., not far from the university campus in Blacksburg. It was, by no coincidence, where Kobza often shopped.

Despite great strides in defining the law of total probability, queuing analysis, and discrete-time semi-Markov chain mathematical logic, no one had ever tackled one of the foremost problems of our time: how to find a parking place. So he wrote pages of equations as he analyzed two strategies, described to the right.

The winner is Pick a Row, Closest Space if your goal is to get from the parking lot entrance to the front door of the store fastest. Cycling cuts the walk by 27 percent in his Wal-Mart test case.

Kobza's wife, Kathy, says science be damned. When she's at the wheel, she still looks for the space closest to the door. ■

Parking lot psychology

A recent study analyzes the advantages and disadvantages in two methods of finding a space in a shopping mall parking lot.



RICARD SAGE—LONDON

SURVIVAL TOOLS

Selling city street savvy

The fight for a convenient parking spot has never been as fierce. Or as expensive. Rates in downtown garages in some major cities can run as high as \$24 per day, which on a per-square-foot basis is two or three times more than rent for fan-

cy offices. The big money is obviously in owning garages, but selling parking intelligence for a profit is the hope of two small enterprises, both named Parking Pal.

Kitty Kolding, a San Franciscan with a knack for amassing databases, released her first "Parking Pal" booklet last year (888-472-7572). It lists 277 San Francisco lots, catego-

rized by area, type (underground, etc.), hours, fees, and validations. Though sales of the \$8 guide have been modest, Kolding plans to publish a book for Chicago in July and one for New York by year's end.

The other Parking Pal is the work of paralegal Louis Camporeale. The Brooklynite was reading parking laws and found

that, yes indeed, one may park for free at a broken meter in New York City. Armed with that knowledge, he printed an official-looking sign for inside the windshield that explains the law to meter maids (\$10; 718-946-6736). Camporeale has signs for commercial vehicles and medical professionals and plans to make signs for motorists in Washington, Los Angeles, Boston, and Chicago. —Janet Ginsburg

