Company Name: Costco
Company Ticker: COST US
Date: 2017-03-02
Event Description: Q2 2017 Earnings Call

Market Cap: 73,184.63
Current PX: 166.73
YTD Change($): +6.62
YTD Change(%): +4.135

Bloomberg Estimates - EPS
Current Quarter: 1.314
Current Year: 5.718
Bloomberg Estimates - Sales
Current Quarter: 28460.900
Current Year: 127083.080

Q2 2017 Earnings Call

Company Participants

- Richard A. Galanti
- Robert D. Nelson

Other Participants

- Simeon Ari Gutman
- Michael Louis Lasser
- John Heinbockel
- Matthew J. Fassler
- Tiffany Kanaga
- Brian Nagel
- Oliver Chen
- Benedict Shim
- Robert F. Ohmes
- Karen Short
- Sean P. Naughton
- Charles Cerankosky
- Kelly Ann Bania
- Peter S. Benedict
- Edward J. Kelly
- Greg Melich
- Molly Smith
- Joseph Isaac Feldman

MANAGEMENT DISCUSSION SECTION

Richard A. Galanti

Operating and Financial Highlights

In today's press release, we have three things to discuss:

- We reported our second quarter and fiscal H1 2017 operating results for the 12-week and 24-week periods ended February 12
- We also reported our monthly sales results for the four-week reporting month of February, which ended this past Sunday, February 26
- And we announced our plans for a membership fee increase in the U.S. and Canada effective this coming June 1

Earnings

- For the 12-week fiscal second quarter, earnings came in at $1.17 per share, or $0.07 below last year's earnings results of $1.24

Co-Branded Credit Card Program

- Some items of note
- Our co-branded credit card and how it impacts our results
- Similar to what we reported in our first quarter results, the Citi Visa co-brand credit card program, which went live last June 20, positively impact our margins by 16BPS, our SG&A expenses by 24BPS as compared to a year earlier, and our overall bottom line in Q2 benefiting earnings by $0.16 per share
  - More detail on that later in the call

Gas Profitability

- Gas profitability
- Our profits from gasoline during the quarter, as compared to last year's second quarter, were lower by $42mm pre-tax or $0.06 per share
  - This is primarily a function of last year's very strong second quarter gas profit results and is consistent with the impact of gas profitability that rises in gas prices will cause on our earnings of gas

IT Expenses

- IT expenses
- Our IT activities impacted SG&A in Q2 on an incremental y-over-y basis by $26mm pre-tax, or 7BPS to SG&A, or $0.04 per share compared to last year
  - This reflects both the direct expenses for the quarter, as well as increasing levels of depreciation and amortization on major completed projects that are now in service

Stocks Compensation Expense

- Stocks compensation expense
- This one is getting less of a negative impact each year, so it's a little smaller than it's been
- It was 10% higher y-over-y, so $10mm higher or about $0.015 impact to the P&L

FX Impact

- FX
- There are two FX items to point out
- And the first one, which I typically point out is, well, how the impact is to changes in foreign currencies relative to U.S. dollar y-over-y
  - As compared to a year ago, during Q2, many of the foreign countries and locations where we operate began to strengthen during the quarter vs. the U.S. dollar, most notably in Canada, resulting in our foreign earnings in Q2, when converted into U.S. dollars, being slightly higher by about $4mm pre-tax or about $0.01 per share, than if the exchange rates have been flat y-over-y

- Number two, as it relates to FX, is a much bigger impact to this quarter's P&L, had to do with FX losses related to forward contracts and U.S. dollar holdings by our international subsidiaries
  - These are used to pay U.S. dollar denominated merchandise payables in those countries
  - Those losses on those exceeded the gains on the related U.S. dollar denominated payables
- This year, in Q2, it was roughly $20mm pre-tax hit
- Last year, in Q2, the gains on those payables exceeded the net losses on forward contracts and U.S. dollar holdings by plus $6mm
  - So y-over-y $26mm y-over-y swing or a negative impact to the P&L by $0.04 per share
- I might add that this y-over-y swing generally runs in the +/- zero to $0.02 per share range
- With all the volatility out there, it was a little bigger this quarter

LIFO Charge

- LIFO
- There was no LIFO charge or credit in this year's second quarter results
  - Whereas, in last year's Q3 results, it had a LIFO credit of $15mm, reflecting deflation in our LIFO indices
  - And so, positively impacted last year's Q2 by $0.02 per share
- While we did have some deflation in the quarter, as we did in Q1, with the switch over to a new accounting system platform in the beginning of the FY, basically even though we've had deflation, we have no associated previous inflation or LIFO charges historically taken
  - And so, if you will, there's a buildup of credit that will offset future LIFO charges to the extent that there's inflation in the future
  - But, again, y-over-y that's $0.02 hit to the quarter y-over-y swing

Tax Rate

- Income taxes
- Last year, in Q2, our effective tax rate was right at 34% due to a discrete tax item this year in Q2, as well as small changes in the profitability mix by country
- Our effective tax rate this year came in rather at – instead of the 34.0%, came in at 35.6%, effectively impacting our Q2 EPS by about $0.03 per share

FX Impact on Sales

- Turning to our second quarter sales, reported sales were up 6% and our 12-week reported comparable sales figure came in at up 3%
- For the quarter, the 3%-plus comparable sales figure was helped by gasoline price inflation to the tune of about 84BPS
- And while the impact from FX was a very slight detriment, again – well, currencies strengthened during the quarter – and net over the quarter was still a slight detriment of about minus 9BPS

  - So together, about 0.75% hit
- Excluding gas price inflation, the reported plus 3% U.S. comp remained at 3%
- Our reported Canadian comp of plus 8% was actually a plus 2%, excluding gas inflation and FX
- Let me remind you that the Canadian dollar strengthened quite a bit
- And the reported minus 2% Other International comp, excluding gas and FX, would've been a plus 3%
- All told, total comps reported for the quarter at 3%-plus for the quarter, excluding gas and FX, with the pluses and the minuses still remained at plus 3% ex-gas and FX

Four-Week Month of February

- For our four-week month of February, which included the last two weeks of the fiscal second quarter, the first two weeks of February, comps came in at a plus 4% on a reported basis
- This consisted of:
  - A plus 5% reported in the U.S
  - A plus 10% reported in Canada
  - And a minus 2% reported for Other International
- As I discussed last month – or actually as we discussed on our monthly sales call last month, the calendar shift of the Chinese Lunar New Year, that was 11 days earlier vs. last year
  - That positively benefited the January reporting period this year and negatively impacted February
- We estimate that this shift was a detriment to February comps of about 0.75% on the total company, and 6.5 percentage points or 650BPS to the Other International segment

Impact of Gasoline Inflation and Foreign Currencies

- Sales in February were positively impacted by both gasoline inflation to the tune of a little over 200BPS; and by overall strengthening in foreign currencies relative to the dollar to the tune of about plus 60BPS
- Ex-gas inflation, in the U.S., the reported plus 5% would've been a plus 2%
- Ex-gas inflation and FX in Canada, the reported plus 10% would've been also a plus 2%
- And the minus 2% reported for Other International would've been a minus 1%, ex-gas and FX, and a plus 5% excluding the Lunar New Year shift
- Total company comps for the month reported at plus 4% would've been a plus 2% excluding gas deflation and FX

Cannibalization

- I'll also point out cannibalization
- We do that every quarter, and typically it's somewhere in the 0.5% range or a little less
- Cannibalization has become a little bigger of a factor to our comp sales results in the last couple months

  - The cannibalization impact on February was approximately 90BPS negative for the total company, and it was actually minus 75% in January
- For February, it was minus 300BPS in Canada
- Mind you, this year we're opening, I believe, seven new warehouses on a base of 91 up here
- So a lot of relative cannibalization for Canada
- And minus 180BPS of the Other International segment in February
- I mentioned the minus 90BPS in February for the total company
- By comparison for all of FYs, 2015 and 2016, total company cannibalization averaged a little under 40BPS to negative
  - So again, it's picked up of late with some of the openings
- We estimate weather had a negative impact on February comps as we had snow in the East and heavy rains in the West
- The estimated impact in that was about:
  - 50BPS in the U.S
  - About 75BPS in Canada
  - And to the total company also about 50BPS

Deflation

- Regarding deflation, overall, and primarily in the U.S., we've seen deflation in the 1%, 1.5% range in February
- Departments such as foods, sundries, frozen foods, liquor, meat, deli showed the most deflation on the foods and sundries side
- On the non-foods side, consumer electronics continue to be deflationary, primarily in the TV category

New Openings

- In terms of new openings, our opening activities – we opened a net of eight new locations during Q1; nine less one relo
- In Q2, we opened four new locations
  - Those included our 13th unit in each of Korea and Taiwan, as well as two new locations in Florida – in the Tampa, Florida area
- For all of FY2017, we have current plans of 29 net new locations
- So 17 additional openings during the third and fourth quarters of FY2017 are planned
- Of the 29 for the year, 14 in the U.S. – I'm sorry eight in Canada
- I mentioned seven earlier
  - It's actually eight on the base of 91 in Canada
- And one each in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Mexico and Australia, as well as our first openings in France and Iceland, most likely in mid to late May

Agenda

This afternoon, I'll also review with you:

- Membership trends and renewal rates
- Our membership fee plans in terms of increases in June
- An update on the Citi Visa Anywhere card
- An update on our Multi-Vendor-Mailer promotional activities
- Additional discussion, of course, on the margins and SG&
- And a little bit about e-commerce results and some initiatives there as well

Incomes Statement

Sales

- In terms of second quarter results, quickly on the sales
- For the quarter, sales were up 6% to $29.13B
- On a reported comp basis, they were up 3%
  - And, again, ex-gas and FX, they still remained at 3%
- For the quarter, the plus 3% reported comp was a combination of an average transaction increase of a little over 1%; and an average shopping frequency increase of 2% for the quarter
- Company-wide, the frequency in the quarter for the U.S. was 3%

Geographic Sales

- In terms of sales by geographic regions, the Midwest, Texas and Northwest regions were strongest, with California not far behind
- Internationally, in local currencies, better performing countries were Mexico, UK and Korea

Merchandise Category Sales

- In terms of merchandise category sales for the quarter, for Q2, within food and sundries, overall flattish y-over-y
- Liquor or spirits and foods were the leaders
- Tobacco continues to be a negative and actually in the high teens, as we've mentioned that we look to cycle the majority of those tobacco sales losses by the end of June

Hardlines

- For hardlines, overall, in the low to mid-single digits
- The strongest department results were tires, hardware and seasonal, with consumer electronics down in the low singles

Softlines

- Softlines were also up in the low to mid-single-digit range, with apparel and home furnishings showing the strongest results
- In fresh foods, comp sales were also in the low to mid-single digits
- And lastly, in Q2 overall, again in terms of deflation, for Q2 it was in the 1.5% to 2% range, similar departments on the foods and sundries side

Non-Foods

- Non-foods again saw a little deflation in consumer electronics, primarily TVs
- For February, traffic was up approximately 2%, including 3% in the U.S., while average transaction was up a little under 2.5%
  - Most of this was due to gas inflation and FX

Sales by Geography

- In terms of geography, for February, Midwest, Texas, San Diego region, which also in our case includes Arizona and Colorado and New Mexico, were the strongest, as well as the Bay Area
- Internationally in local currencies, UK, Mexico, and Canada were at the top of the list

Merchandise Category Sales

- From a merchandise category standpoint, excluding FX, food and sundries and hardlines, including the consumer electronics were up low single digits, softlines up mid-single and fresh foods slightly negative for the February reporting period
  - Again, a little deflation is impacting these numbers

Multi-Vendor-Mailer Promotional Activities

Expansion of Mailers

- Before moving to the income statement, a few comments about our Multi-Vendor-Mailer, the coupon booklets that we send out and have online, what we call the MVMs, these promotional activities and a few changes that we recently implemented
- As most of you know from many, many years ago, the MVMs have grown and evolved over 22 years from one six-week summer coupon booklet back in 1995 to generally year-round promotional pieces with great values on items being offered in each mailer
- Over the years, we've expanded the mailers and have continued to tweak them

MVM Program Revamp

- More recently, we've revamped the MVM program, creating some newness, enhancing member values on some of the items – or many of the items, and creating a little bit more merchandising excitement

- We've eliminated a few of the MVMs over the course of the year and also there will be fewer days
- We've reduced the number of items per mailer, but we've overall increased the offering in terms of total savings on those items
  - And we're also moving, in some cases, to everyday low pricing, EDLP, where we can drive higher overall sales and show better everyday pricing and value
- In terms of second quarter 2017, it was really the transition to fiscal quarter for these MVM changes, if you will
- The first revamped MVM ran in December, which is near the beginning of Q2

Fewer MVM Promotional Days

- Overall in Q2, we had 17 fewer MVM promotional days
- Mind you, the quarter itself has – 12 weeks times 7 is 84, a couple of days closed for the holidays, but basically 17 out of those 84. 71 fewer items are offered in those MVMs, but again higher overall sales compared to last year in the MVMs
- Overall, so far we liked what we see
- We continue to tweak it a little, but remember we're still in the early stages of this
- We know that 17 fewer MVM days in our 84-day second quarter and 10 fewer MVM days in our 28-day month of February probably hurt traffic a little
  - But we shouldn't see that latter aspect in Q3, as there are the same number of MVM days y-over-y in Q3
  - So again, Q2 was really the transition of that

Operational Review

Membership Fees

- Now moving on to the line items in the income statement, in terms of membership fees, coming in at $636mm, up 5% or $33mm vs. last year, down a basis point
- Minimal impact from F because again, while they were increasing over the course of the year, they started off lower in the beginning of Q2

Membership Renewal

- In terms of membership, we continue to enjoy strong renewal rates, coming in a little over 90% in the U.S. and Canada and 87.7% worldwide on a fully captured basis
- And we continue to see increasing penetration of the Executive Membership program in the countries where we offer it

Membership Growth

- In terms of number of members at Q2 end, at Q2 end primary Gold Star came in at 37.5mm, up from 12 weeks earlier at 37.1mm
- Primary Business 7.4mm, up from 7.3mm 12 weeks earlier

- Business add-on 3.4mm, down from 3.5mm
  - That has to do with some of those people converting into their own membership, generally as they become Executive Members
- And so total accounts 48.3mm compared to 47.9mm a fiscal quarter earlier

Total Cardholders

- Total cardholders 88.1mm at second quarter end, up from 87.3mm 12 weeks earlier
- As of Q2 end, our paid Executive Memberships stood at 17.9mm, which is an increase of about 200,000 from 12 weeks earlier or about 17,000 additional per week
- Executive members represent a little over a third of our member base and about two-thirds of our sales

Renewal Rates

- In terms of renewal rates, again overall in the U.S. and Canada, 90.2%, down 0.1 from 90.3% at the end of the quarter, which was also 90.3% at the end of the FY back in late August
  - Business within that remained at 94.3% in both fiscal one and two quarters end
- And Gold Star, primary Gold Star at 89.5%
- Again, probably a little rounding just pushed it down instead of up that 0.1 percentage point
- Worldwide actually picked up a little
- At Q2 end, it was 87.7%, up from 87.5% at Q2 end and 87.6% at FY-end
  - We feel these are pretty good numbers and don't really see a lot of impact
- We believe a lot of it has to do with the conversions in credit cards
- If you recall me talking probably a year, year and a half ago about some of this stuff we saw in Canada as we transitioned the Canadian credit card program a year and a half or so earlier than that we did in last June here in the U.S
  - And if I look back, as an example, just a year ago and Q3, the Canadian renewal rate was 90.6%
- For this quarter it was 91.6%
  - So it started to come back as we would expect
- Again, U.S., we're still seeing some of that auto-bill impact that we believe is a big piece of it
- Back in Q3 a year ago, we were 90.3% and actually 90.4% the prior quarter, down to 90.1% at the end of the year
  - And we're at 89.9% at Q2 2017 end
- So again, pretty much the kind of impact that we would have expected to see and not really terribly concerned about that at all

Announcement on Membership Fee

U.S. and Canadian Operations

- I want to spend a minute regarding our announcement on the increases of fees this morning, which will be effective June 1
- First, the planned increases relate to our U.S. and Canadian operations
- Recall that fee increases, membership fee increases, took place in several other countries effective this past September 1 at the beginning of the FY
- In both the U.S. and Canada, which by the way represents just under 90% of our company's fees, about 87% or 88%, the current annual fee for our individual Gold Star, business, and business add-on memberships, what we refer to as our primary memberships, is currently $55 year and has been at that level since November of 2011, about 5.5 years ago
  - The annual fees for these memberships will go to $60 effective June 1

Executive Membership Rewards

- Also, in the U.S. and Canada, our $110 per year Executive Membership fee, which has been at that level also since November 2011, is being increased by $10 to $120
- Also, with regard to Executive Membership, the 2% rewards associated with the Executive Membership will increase
- Currently, the annual reward is capped at $750
  - That will be increased to $1,000
- So while there is an increase in the annual fee, the reward goes up to $1,000, and that's based on eligible purchases
  - That of course is in addition to the 2% reward that one gets if they use the Citi Visa Anywhere card at Costco, or the 4% when they buy gas at Costco
- In all, approximately 35mm member households will be impacted by this increase, approximately half of whom are Executive Members and half of whom are primary Gold Star, business, and business add-on members
- Note that the membership fees are accounted for on a deferred basis

Impact on P&L

- So in terms of how it hits our P&L, our membership income line, approximately one-twelfth, if you will, one month worth of the increase in fees from the June renewers, that will be the first group that gets this fee increase
- Approximately one-twelfth of the increase will be booked to the income statement in that first month of June, with an additional one-twelfth being booked in each of the succeeding 11 months
  - Next, increased fees from our July renewals, those will be booked starting in July one-twelfth, and following through to the following June and so on
- So the full P&L impact of these increases will be over a 23-month timeline, such that the last group of members to be billed at these new levels will be next May of 2018, with a booking, if you will, of those $5 and $10 increases being recorded over that month and the succeeding 11 months; i.e., 23 months out

Citi Visa Card Offering

- Before continuing down the income statement line items, a quick update and a few updated stats on the Citi Visa card offering
- Again, this began last June 20, early in our Q4 2016
- Recall that we began last June 20 with approximately 11.4mm co-branded cards or about 7.4mm accounts being transferred to Citi for conversion to the new Citi Visa Anywhere card
- As of Q2 end, just under 90% of the accounts transferred have been activated, recognizing all accounts transferred to begin with were not activated
  - I think it was down in the low 80s at the time, low to mid-80s
- And in fact, at just under 90% activated as of Q2 end, that's up a few percentage points from Q1 end 12 weeks earlier
- Also, we now have about 1.2mm new approved member accounts, representing about 1.6mm new Citi Visa cards out there since the June 20 conversion
  - Again, this is also about up about 200,000 accounts over the past 12 weeks during fiscal second quarter
- Lastly, we are seeing the Citi Visa co-brand portfolio of total spend higher y-over-y, both organically from the cards converted last June as well as from these new accounts
- We'll see what the next few quarters bring
- Overall, in terms of conversion, usage and new sign-ups for the card, we feel it's going pretty well so far

Other Financial Results

Gross Margin

- Going down to the gross margin line, our gross margin in Q2 on a reported basis was lower y-over-y by 24BPS, coming in at 11.00% compared to last year's 11.24%
- Now, as usual, there's a lot of moving parts here
- Gas inflation and the impact of the credit card, some of that benefit goes to the sales line, which therefore improves the reported margin
- And I'll ask you to do my little matrix here, and we'll do it for first and second quarters
- There'll be four columns:
  - Reported Q1 2017
  - Without gas deflation in Q1 2017, is the second column
  - Third column is reported Q2 2017
  - And the last column would be, without gas inflation in Q2 2017

Core Merchandise

- The first line item would be core merchandise
- In Q1, reported plus 19BPS y-over-y; without gas deflation plus 16BPS
- For Q2, reported plus 1 basis point; and without gas inflation, plus 9BPS

- Ancillary businesses, minus 5BPS and minus 6BPS in the two Q1 columns
- In Q2, 2017, in the two columns, minus 20BPS and minus 18BPS

Penetration of Gas Sales

- Again, reflecting lower margins in gas y-over-y, while increasing the penetration of gas sales
- 2% reward, minus 2BPS and minus 1 basis point in columns one and two; and in columns three and four, zero and minus 1 basis point
- LIFO, minus 2BPS and minus 2BPS in Q1; and minus 5BPS and minus 5BPS in Q2
  - Again, recognizing that a year ago we had a deflation and therefore LIFO credits this year while we have deflation we can't take them, since there's nothing to take them from prior offsetting LIFO charges
- Other, last year there was, I believe, a one-time legal settlement that added 19BPS to the first two columns here; and zero and zero in columns three and four
- You add all that up, last year in Q1, y-over-y margins were up 29BPS on a reported basis and up 26BPS ex-gas deflation

Citi Visa Impact to Margins

- I also mentioned last year that within those numbers, the Citi Visa impact to margins within that 29BPS to 26BPS was plus 13BPS
- In the next two columns, the reported Q2, 2017, again margins on a reported basis came in 24BPS lower y-over-y; and ex-gas and FX, came in 15BPS lower than last year
- Now, mind you, both of those numbers do include the benefit from the Citi Visa program to the tune of about 16BPS to the positive
  - So, again, taking those out, the reported minus 24BPS, adding the minus 16BPS in, that would be a minus 40BPS
  - And adding minus 16BPS to the minus 15BPS, that would be a minus 31BPS on an adjusted basis, if you will, using Citi Visa
- Now, the core merchandise component of gross margin was higher by 1%, as you see in the chart, and plus 9% excluding gas
- Excluding the benefits of Citi Visa, it was minus 15%; and minus 7% excluding gas inflation

Subcategories

- As I always mentioned, subcategories within the margin, our core subcategories – food and sundries, hardlines, softlines and fresh foods – as a percent of their own sales were positive y-over-y by 7BPS
  - But with the declining sales penetration of that, given the inflation in gas, the contribution is minus 7BPS
- Food and sundries and hardlines were both slightly higher y-over-y on their own sales
- Softlines was up about 60BPS, and fresh foods was lower y-over-y by about 10BPS

Ancillary and Other Business Gross Margin

- Ancillary and other business gross margin, I mentioned, was down 20BPS in the quarter
  - Most of the y-over-y decrease was due to lower gas profits, as I mentioned earlier in the call. 2% reward, 1 basis point of negative impact to ex-gas, just implying a slightly higher sales penetration ex-gas inflation on a y-over-y basis
- And I already mentioned LIFO
  - That was about $0.02 per share as well

Margins, Ex the Citi Visa Credit Card Benefit

- Overall, our margins, ex the Citi Visa credit card benefit, were most negatively impacted by lower gas margins, somewhat negatively impacted by 5BPS from LIFO y-over-y, with slightly lower y-over-y sales penetration in the quarter also hurting it a little bit, even though core margins on the core sales were up 7BPS
- I might also mention that the plus 7BPS core margin improvement y-over-y, this is notwithstanding some of the pricing initiatives that I mentioned earlier, like EDLP, that we've been taking in these last couple months

SG&A

- Moving to reported SG&A, our SG&A percentage in second quarter y-over-y was lower or better by 5BPS, but higher or worse by 4BPS ex-gas inflation, coming in at 10.23% this year compared to 10.28% last year on a reported basis
  - Again, excluding the benefits of the Citi Visa program, which clearly helped SG&A by lowering merchant charges, that was 19 – including benefits from that, y-over-y SG&A was higher by 19BPS and 28BPS, ex-gas inflation
- In terms of the performance y-over-y in SG&A, operations component, as I mentioned, was lower or better by 8BPS y-over-y; and plus 1 basis point, excluding the impact of gas
- You see that in the chart we just drew
- The plus 8 basis point improvement consisted again of much lower Citi Visa merchant fees – related fees, somewhat offset primarily by higher payroll and employee benefits costs
  - And again, that has to do with the underlying sales being a little lower and a few other things
- Central expense was higher y-over-y in Q2 by 2BPS, 3BPS without gas
- Again, IT was at 7BPS or 8BPS without gas of that and offset by a couple things that went the other way
- Stock compensation expense, again 1 basis point to 2BPS, not a big amount

Pre-Opening Expense and Operating Income

- Moving down to pre-opening expense
- Pre-opening expense was higher by $5mm, coming in at $15mm in Q2 of 2017, vs. $10mm a year earlier
- Pre-opening relates not only to the actual openings in that quarter, but also some of the ones leading up to it or getting ready to be opened rather
  - That was four openings in Q2 this year, only one opening last year

- There's also higher y-over-y pre-opening expenses related to our entrance into two new countries, France and Iceland, as we already have people on the ground
- Operating income in Q2, all told, came in at $844mm; 1% lower or $12mm lower from last year's $856mm

Interest Expense

- Below operating income line, reported interest expense came in at $31mm in both this and last year's fiscal second quarters
- I might mention that interest expense beginning partway through Q3 – I believe the middle of March – will improve quite a bit with the scheduled March 15 $1.1B debt repayment
  - This is a 10-year fixed rate debt instrument, I believe, at about 5.5% fixed rate interest
- Net, we'll save about $50mm a year pre-tax, about $60mm of reduced interest expense on that pre-tax, offset by cutting a check for the $1.1B, if you will, and losing some interest income on that to the tune of roughly $10mm
  - And that's just a simple guesstimate
- Interest income and other was lower y-over-y by $20mm in the quarter

SG&A

- I was just informed that I skipped the SG&A chart
  - So why don't we go back and write that just so it's easy for those of you that put it down
- Again, four columns for SG&A
- Reported and without gas deflation, Q1 2017 and Q1 2017; and reported and without gas inflation, Q2 2017 and Q2 2017
  - I think these numbers that I just read will make a little more sense
- Operations, Q1 2017 reported minus 8BPS or higher by 8BPS; and minus 6BPS without gas deflation
- Plus 8BPS and plus 1 basis point in columns three and four
- Central, minus 9BPS and minus 9BPS; and in Q2, in those columns three and four, minus 2BPS and minus 3BPS
- Stock compensation, minus 7BPS and minus 6BPS; and then minus 1 basis point and minus 2BPS in Q2
- Mind you, it's always higher in Q1 because we do our big total company, total employee – those that get our issues grant in October
- Other, plus 8BPS and plus 8BPS last year
  - Again, that was a y-over-y unusual item, I believe; and zero and zero in columns three and four
  - You add it all up, on a reported basis in Q1 2017, it was higher y-over-y on a reported basis by 16BPS; and without gas deflation, by 13BPS
- On a reported basis in Q2 2017, we were lower or better by 5BPS and higher or slightly worse by 4BPS without gas inflation
- As I mentioned, the Citi Visa impact to SG&A in Q1 was 25BPS, that's in those numbers, and 24BPS in Q2
  - I won't go through the numbers that I just mentioned

- My apology for doing that in reverse order

Interest Expense

- Below the operating income line, reported interest expense came in, as I mentioned, at $31mm
- And I also mentioned that come March 15 we're going to save about $0.08 per share or $50mm pre-tax net, $60mm reduced interest expense, and roughly about $10mm pre-tax reduced interest income
- I was just getting ready to talk about the next line item on the income statement, the interest income and other
  - It was lower y-over-y by $20mm in the quarter
- This year, in the quarter, it was a minus $4mm number
- Needless to say, it's the other, not the interest income
  - And last year, it was plus $16mm

Net Income

- Actual interest income and other, other than the FX that I talked about earlier, for the quarter were better y-over-y by $6mm
  - Offsetting this, of course, was that $26mm in charges related to various FX items that I discussed at the beginning of the call
- Overall, pre-tax income was lower by 4% or $32mm in the quarter, coming in at $809mm vs. $841mm a year ago
- I mentioned earlier in the call income taxes, a little higher rate, coming in at 35.6% this fiscal quarter vs. 34% last year
- We think for the year our current best guess for effective rate for the year is actually a little lower than that 35.6% that we recorded in Q2
- It's probably somewhere more likely in the 35.3% or 35.4%
  - That's our best guess
- Overall, reported net income came at $515mm, compared to $546mm net income last year in the same quarter

Balance Sheet Summary

- A quick rundown of other topics
- The balance sheet is included in this afternoon's press release
- A couple of balance sheet items that we try to give out
- Depreciation and amortization for Q2 totaled $312mm for the quarter and $609mm for H1 this FY
- In terms of AP ratio, accounts payable, as a percent of inventories, 92% reported both this year and last year
  - If you take out non-merchandise payables for construction and other things, this year it came in at 82% AP ratio and last year it was 83%
- Just rounding down a little there

- Average inventory per warehouse came in at $13.1mm compared to $12.8mm a year ago or up about $350,000
- Variances, a little over $100,000 of it's health and beauty aids and alike over-the-counter items
- Some of that has to do with the timing of our MVM buildup in February

- Others are mostly non-foods
- Major is about $100,000, small electrics about $75,000, and hardware about $50,000 to $60,000
  - So nothing terribly out of pocket there

CapEx

- In terms of CapEx, first quarter we spent $670mm – I'm sorry, in Q2 we spent $515mm
- In Q1, we spent $670mm
- So total YTD, $1.185B
- We estimate for the year CapEx will still be in the range of $2.7B to $2.8B
  - So $1.5B to go, if you will – $1.5B plus to go
- Next, Costco Online, we're in the U.S., Canada, UK, Mexico, Korea and Taiwan; Korea and Taiwan being the most recent additions about a year ago

Sales and Profits

- For Q2, sales and profits were up, of course
- Total online sales were up 12% and up 11% on a comp basis
- As I've spoken about a little bit, probably in Q4 last year in October and then a fiscal quarter ago back in early December, we continue to:
  - Improve our offerings
  - Our merchandise offerings
  - And enhance our member experience online

Merchandise Improvement

- In terms of improving merchandise, we continue to add new and exciting merchandise
- And we continue to improve in-stocks on high-velocity items
- In terms of recent initiatives – and recent online additions include Samsung appliances and a variety of added apparel brands, both direct and indirectly purchased, with additional offerings in various non-food categories in the coming months
  - These would include Kohler bath and kitchen, Reebok men's and women's activewear and footwear, and Spyder ski and outerwear, to name a few
- We've also continued to add various health and beauty aid, both regular ones and upscale ones, and sundries items to our online offerings, increasing both online page viewing and member shopping frequency as well

- One recent fun item to note, leading up to Valentine's Day, we offered online 50 long-stem roses for $49.99, and that included delivery
- We had sales in those three days of over $2mm, represented over two cargo planes
- And most important, that $49.99 price point for 50 long-stem roses is $30 less than what we sold the same item for just a year ago
    - And if you're late to getting those roses, we are now offering them at $39.99, including shipping

Improving Experience and Functionality of The Site

- In terms of improving experience and functionality of the site, we've improved search
- We've shortened the checkout process, and we've improved our members' ability to track their orders
    - And we'll continue to do some more of that
- Just recently, we automated much of our returns process, not only providing members a much better quality of service, but also reducing by more than 20% in just the first couple of months our call center volume related to returns
- There'll be more to come over this coming CY in several of these things
    - And we're finally getting around to doing some of those

Distribution Logistics

- Lastly, we continue to improve our distribution logistics
- For example, in the U.S. and Canada, we now fulfill online orders from 11 depot distribution points, which, of course, allows for closer and fast delivery of online orders
- Overall, as I mentioned, we have plenty of online initiatives going on, both in terms of member experience and service, expanded products and services offerings, and greater value to the member

Other Home and Office Delivery Sales Channels

- Finally, a quick update on other home and office delivery sales channels
- As you know, we partner with Google Express in five cities, operating out of 15 of our Costco U.S. warehouses
- In addition, we're working with Google Express on a new service offering, one to three-day shipping of products throughout the continental United States
- We also continue to work with Instacart
- Instacart currently operates in 26 U.S. cities, in our case utilizing 132 of our U.S. locations
    - And we're either testing or getting ready to test two other third-party delivery services within the next month or so

Footage Expansion

- In terms of expansion, in FY2016, last year, we opened 29 net units, about 4.5% square footage growth
- This year, it looks like it's going to be also 29 net new units

    - So about 4.25% square footage growth
- The planned FY2017 locations, these 29 locations by country, would be 14 in the U.S.; eight in Canada; and one each in Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Australia, Mexico, and then the new ones in France and Iceland
- As of Q2 end, total warehouse square footage stood at 105.1mm square feet

Stock Buybacks

- Next, in terms of stock buybacks
- As you recall, in Q1 we repurchased $122mm or 809,000 shares of Costco stock for an average price of right around $151 per share
- In Q2, we repurchased $66mm or 411,000 shares at an average price of just under $160; $159.86, I believe

Dividends

- In terms of dividends, our current quarterly dividend continues to stand at $0.45 per share on a quarterly basis
    - This $1.80 per share annualized represents a total cost to company of right at $800mm

Upcoming Conference

Lastly, before I turn it back to Frederica, our FY2017 third quarter scheduled earnings release date for the 12-week period ending – third quarter ending May 7 will be – we'll do that after the market close on Thursday, May 25, with the earnings call that afternoon at 2 PM again

QUESTION AND ANSWER SECTION

<Q - Simeon Ari Gutman>: So, Richard, I think the big question that I think will come up a lot, it looks like – I'm not in front of all the numbers – but margins in this quarter sequentially vs. Q1 seem like they got a little bit weaker. And I'm excluding I think some of the gasoline impact, which granted I don't think was fully captured. Is anything changing as far as investment back in the business, SG&A dollars, e-commerce, you're just reinvesting back in the price sort of that we're not seeing?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Certainly the gas inflation does have an impact on and as well as does the increasing sales penetration of gas. That's probably as much of an impact. Certainly, some of the more promotional stuff we did with everyday low pricing had an impact. I didn't bother to try to quantify it, because it's lots of different items and that's what we do. If anything, we did it a little more because we wanted to. There's been some other things going on, nothing major though. I look at the numbers and I don't see a big change other than the things I mentioned, and perhaps what I just mentioned about that.

<A>: [Indiscernible] (42:42)

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Bob is reminding me, and then getting back to the gasoline comment, a lot of it has to do with the contribution, penetration of these areas. With gas inflation, I think gas prices were up 29% over the year and gallon comps were higher because of what we do. We have good prices. That had probably a bigger impact. Gas is typically – these are rough numbers – 800 or 900BPS lower than the rest of the merchandise that we sell. It could be 700 or 1,000BPS, but it's big and you've got increasing penetration of that.

So not only were gas margins down with rising gas prices within the gasoline business, but the impact that it has – and again, if you get back to what I mentioned on the core margins on their own sales – which is roughly, what, 80% of our sales, food and sundries, hardlines, softlines and fresh foods – on core margins y-over-y in Q2, they were up 7BPS. But the contribution, if you will, to the total here was minus 7BPS.

<Q - Simeon Ari Gutman>: Got it, okay. That's helpful. And then I guess my follow up, just thinking about reinvestment rates in the business where you have a membership fee increase coming down the pike at some point – or now we know when – and there's a lot of debate how much flow-through or not. I guess maybe the way to ask it is, is there a natural run rate of reinvestment that you as managers of this business try to put back in? And sort of where are we running relative to that? And, yeah, I'm trying to gauge when we get the membership fee increase, are we going to see that get pushed back into price as well? Or is that some of that's going to come through to the bottom line?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: My view is, I'm speaking historically here, that – and roughly we've done increases about every five years; and we're certainly not smart enough to figure out how to put it in over the five years. We know it hits the membership fee income line over about two years. We also know that it hits very little in the first month, one-twelfth of the renewals, if you will.

Historically, we're generally taking – we invest in a lot of things, including continuing to invest in price, which might even be a slight negative then. Arguably, we've chosen, with some of the revamping of the MVM and some of the things we're doing with everyday low pricing to, if you will, do some of that now. And that really is, in my view, not directly related to if, when and now – now when, not if, a fee increase. But I would argue that we probably did a little more now, certainly the reduced number of MVM days. Even in the MVM, what we've done is, is we've basically gone out to vendors and worked with them. The goal for us and them is to drive sales.

Basically, it's a better value to the member, which means it's a little more expensive both for the vendor and us. So I would say, in some ways, we started that process, or we always do that process. And you'll see when you see. But, generally speaking, and my view is it historically goes in over a longer period of time, not just those two years; the net of everything.

<Q - Michael Louis Lasser>: Richard, presumably you're investing in price because you're seeing a more competitive environment. Can you quantify or at least qualitatively comment on how much more promotionally and competitively intense it is now than when you've seen it in the past, particularly around the time when you've raised your fees?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: You know what, I mean we have a couple of senior merchants in the room with me shaking their head because – and I concur, this is really not terribly related to that – to the fact that there's increased levels of competition. When we look at our direct competitors, notably direct warehouse clubs and certainly supermarkets on certain key fresh foods and sundries items, a lot of what you read about were some of the big-box discounters and their investment in price, which is formidable. Our view is that impacts – and the competitors have to deal with that more directly or supermarkets, in the case of use of Walmart or Target or whatever else. We really haven't seen a big change there, and certainly this was not motivated by that.

I think more of it has to do with over the last few years you see some of the sales lift in some of the things that the MVM has been great for us for so many years changing. And it's an iterative process. If anything, just like we are ultimately – we're going to do the right thing for the long-term, irrespective of how it impacts now. We knew and we show them, but we don't give direction. We knew that this was going to have some impact, not a big impact frankly, but with having less days by going to some EDLP. And it's what it does to drive sales.

I don't know where else you can get in the country a 40-pack of half a liter water bottles for $2.99, down from $3.49. And we're driving units and we're driving a little traffic, and that's what we do. And it's not because somebody else went down to that price. We look at some key items and how do we do this. And I think it has very little to do with either a change in the level of competition or the fact that we're getting ready to do a fee increase. We do that really somewhat independently.

<Q - Michael Louis Lasser>: And just to quantify the impact of pricing, you got a 15 basis point benefit to your gross margin from the credit card transition. It sounds like you invested maybe all of that and more back in the everyday low price?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Again, I think the same comment. We didn't say, hey, we got this much back; let's use it all, or let's use any of it. We really looked at those independently. I think one of the comments I made on Q1 call, which is Q1 that there was really some transparency of how big of an impact and successful the new credit card has been, both in terms of improving – adding to our gross margin percentage and reducing our SG&A percentage in terms of lower fees.

We really didn't say, wow, that's so big. Let's use it. We do what we're going to do on pricing, and this is where the chips fell on that. I think one of the comments I made on Q1 conference call was, clearly, we were more lucky than smart that that helped offset some of the reductions and things, and this is what we do.

<Q - Michael Louis Lasser>: Okay. And my follow-up question is, the assumption is because you tend to skew higher on the socioeconomic income test demographic or your membership fees such that you were not impacted by the delayed tax refunds in February. Do you think that's right, or do you think there was some impact? And if so, could you quantify it?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: I can't quantify it certainly. Historically, when we've been asked similar questions about when there were issues with food stamp programs or things like that or this, we generally don't feel that we're impacted a lot at all. It certainly is not a positive, but my guess is it's not very much of a negative either. I would lean towards saying not really a big impact at all.

<Q - John Heinbockel>: So, Richard, when you think about the Executive increase in particular, how much discussion was there, what you should do with that in light of where your club competitors are, where Prime is? And then when you think about where that goes over time, what kind of things can you add? Obviously, the 2% is a big benefit. What can you add to the Executive that people might want that could allow that to continue to go up over time?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: First of all, what we do best is value to the member on products and services, and certainly that's going to be part of it. As it relates to enhancing both the primary membership and more importantly the Executive Membership, I will say – and I'm not being cute – stay tuned. We've got other things that we're planning to do. Nothing is earth-shattering, but there are several things we'll do, including I'm sure one late summer, early fall.

So we'll continue to do that, and we'll continue to look at the value proposition on the credit card. As I mentioned I'm sure a year ago when we first transitioned to it, whatever we do – and certainly the credit card profitability and success has been better than I think we and our partners had originally planned, we'll look to enhance that value over time. But that's not something you do until you're a couple years out to see where things trend out. And we'll continue to be very good at driving value and getting you to say wow.

<Q - John Heinbockel>: Again, when you think about what you could have done with Executive, was there even any serious consideration to leave it alone, enhance the value proposition and push more people toward Executive? You pretty much knew you wanted to do the $10 from the beginning.

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: I think we always start with the premise that we pretty much knew that. We look at other things as well, and we'll see what happens in the future. Nothing is going to happen in the next year or so, I'm sure, but there are some other reasons in the State of California that it makes sense as it relates to sales taxability.

We're pretty simple, and it works for us. We're pretty simple and we're pretty extreme in terms of value. And we always talk about, what about another level of membership above that. Do you ever figure out how to just offer only an Executive? We're not there yet, but rest assured there will be more value-oriented things coming to the Executive for sure over time and more value to all members in general pricing of things.

<Q - John Heinbockel>: All right, and then just one last thing. So when you look at KS assortment over time here, so clearly it's grown. It looks like maybe up 50% over the past five years or so. That's imperfect because there's stuff that cycles in and out. But when you think about where that ends up three years from now, five years from now, and obviously your total assortment is staying somewhat the same. Are we going to get a higher percentage of KS items just continuously almost forever?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Sure, I think yes. But our success has been based first by selling branded goods at the best value out there, and it's two reasons, one, such sharp savings relative to everybody else. And two, our KS, if it's as good as, if not better, quality, which is our starting point, and even a greater savings vs. what we sell the brand for, that's even better. And it keeps our members happy and it keeps us and our vendors honest. And we'll continue to drive it, recognizing there aren't a lot of $300mm and $500mm items out there like the waters and the paper goods and the K-Cups and whatever. But there are lots of $20mm and $30mm and $50mm items that we get surprised every day. And so yes, there will be a continued push for that, but there's also a continued push to add brands that historically haven't been prepared to sell us.

<Q - Matthew J. Fassler>: First of all, just to make sure that we understand the magnitude of the impact of the change in the MVM and the move to EDLP, when you talk about EDLP, are you solely talking about stepping in and displacing the MVM? And is there a way to estimate the impact that that might have on margin, and does that impact grow or dissipate next quarter as the date disparity for the MVM comes down?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Really yes and no to each of those parts of those questions. We've tried some items using the MVM as an add-on. Some we've with vendors, chosen to go to EDLP and get out of the MVM, others we've gone the other way. Sometimes it works one way and sometimes it works the other way, and that's how you figure that out.

Again, not to be smug but we really don't see it as – yes, small basis points impact $29B quarterly sales figures by lot, but we really – it was probably – we knew it was going to impact us this quarter. We don't provide directions so we really can't say anything. It should improve a little in the next quarter, but that's not based on oh my God, let's change it. It's just that's what happens.

<Q - Matthew J. Fassler>: And is the improvement based on the better sales that you're likely to get from the MVMs y-over-y or some other element related to the change you're making?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: It's all of the above, including – we've only done this for a couple of MVMs here. So a subset of all the vendors over the years that have participated in this with us, some that participate with us all the time for 22 years, some that are in and out and seasonal and some that are new. And as we see the things that work, we certainly don't keep that a secret and we go to our vendors, and we have vendors and some examples that are wanting to do more for us, wanting to get those prices even lower because they see the lift impact on it. So it really is all of the above. And I joke and use the word it's a little strategery because we are merchants and we try a lot of different things and we're pretty good at figuring out what works and what doesn't and working with our vendors to do that.

<Q - Matthew J. Fassler>: And one quick follow-up. Where are we right now in the credit card benefits cycle for you? Are there elements associated with Citi Visa, whether it's signups, whether it's outside sales and the financial benefits they have to you that would lead to the financial benefit to you to ramp up, or are we leveling off at what's likely to be sustainable?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: I think there was some benefit in Q4 but not big enough to actually separate out. The big kahuna was in Q1 when we reported it and now it's Q2. So again, very simply, my guess is sometime you'll get some incremental benefit in Q4 to get the other half of it, if you will. It's not exactly half of that. In addition, though, there's probably a little more in Q4 because of some of the challenges of the conversion itself.

And then beyond that, I think I've said occasionally that it should and hopefully will be the gift that keeps on giving a little as we drive more penetration both in Costco with the 2% component reward on that along with the 2% Executive Member reward. And it will drive outside spend because of the fact that the card is accepted at so many places. And if we can get you to use it everywhere or most everywhere, particularly those small merchants that generally pay higher fees to everyone, there is a component of that that we benefit from.

So there's no way to predict what's going to happen. I think on a y-over-y comparison, the biggest bang for this buck is over the first 12, maybe first 15 months, because the first 8 or 10 weeks had the challenges of the conversion. And beyond that, there should be incremental benefits, but certainly not as big as the first year.

<Q - Matthew J. Fassler>: All right, thank you so much.

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: And by the way, at some point two or three years out, I'm guessing you're going to see, when we get comfortable and see where it goes, you're going to see, again enhanced improvement because that's what we do, on even the reward proposition, both ours and our cards.

<Q - Tiffany Kanaga>: I've know you've gone through all the numbers in quite some detail. But can you help us understand a little better, as we're lapping quite a significant deleverage in core SG&A excluding gas? So we didn't see the leverage this quarter that we had hoped for. Can you walk us through what might have held back the core SG&A line ex-gas this quarter and how to think about it going forward as we continue to lap even greater deleverage?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: At the end of the day it's mostly, as it always is, payroll and benefits. Healthcare is inflationary.

<A>: We still have bottom of scale increases…

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: We still have bottom of scale increases that we've done, and that was actually in March of last year that's when that will anniversary, I think mid-March, so that hurt us a little bit.

And yeah, again, we've looked at the numbers – I think we always look in the mirror at each monthly budget meeting and say, could we have done a little better on controlling labor in the warehouses, controlling overtime hours? Sure. And there's probably a few basis points that we could do better on. But for the most part I think it's the underlying comp.

And mind you, using that, again, silly example of the water where we go from $3.49 to $2.99, and sell a lot more units, the margin dollars are +/- the same, but there's more labor involved; not a lot more, but again, all these things are incremental, add a few basis points.

So other than that – and the big one of course is all the modernization-related stuff, as we've had these big systems come on. It's like building a building, you build it, and then you wait until you open it if you will, or turn it on, and that's when you start to amortize it, in our case, so typically over five and seven years, sometimes three on a few things. And some of those big nuts, if you will, have occurred in the last year.

<Q - Brian Nagel>: I too wanted just to drill a little further into the margin, so just to be clear, and I know you've discussed this a lot already, Richard, but if I'm looking at my model, so the year-on-year gross margins were down, ex-membership fees, down by 24BPS. So that's the first time in a while, at least in several quarters now, that that's been down. So this shift from the MVM to more EDLP, is that a significant portion of that?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: I'm sorry, ask the last part of the question. Somebody was saying something here.

<Q - Brian Nagel>: The question I asked, I mean, and I know this is a repetitive because others have asked similar questions. But I look at – so if your gross margins ex-membership fees here in the fiscal Q2 were down 24BPS, and again that's the first time, because I've looked back sequentially, doing the same math, that they were down. So how much of that – if we look at that break in trend then, how much of that can be explained by this shift from the MVM to EDLP?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: I would say if there were five factors, I'm making this up, it's probably the third or fourth most impactful. And the biggest single factor, which is well more than half of the factors in total, is gasoline. Gasoline impacts us two ways. One, you have substantially lower margin on gasoline sales. And two, you have increasing penetration of gas, because of a 29% higher price per gallon.

This is a business – I don't know the exact number in my head, but it's 10% of our total company sales, and it's ranged from 9% to 12% or 13%. So that alone – again, if I go back to Q2, if we look again on a reported basis, lower by 24BPS, ex gas inflation minus 15BPS, but that minus 15BPS includes minus 18BPS, of ancillary, most of which is gas. And so that's where a lot of it is.

<Q - Brian Nagel>: Okay. And then on the shift from MVM to EDLP, is it fair to assume that if this is implemented it could have more of a near-term impact on margins and then maybe, say, it takes a while for sales to catch up? And I'm thinking there is a – because the MVMs to a certain extent is a call to action to your consumers, correct? So if you shift to an EDLP maybe you lose that call to action, over time the consumer figures it out?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Well, a couple of things here. First of all, it's not like we've changed this thing – it's not binary. We've not gone from all this way to all another way. It is a transition quarter and we did a bunch of stuff in that transition quarter. But again, that's, in my view, one of the smallest factors relating to this decline in margins y-over-y.

And the comment I made earlier to one of the questions on the call about what do we see going forward, I think Matt had asked it, is that it should not be an issue. Our guess; we'll see. But we don't believe it will be an issue in Q3 like it was in Q2. So I really wouldn't lose a lot of sleep at this juncture over that and certainly not lose any sleep over the fact that we've made this major change. The major change is we changed it, and we're seeing the things and components of it that work and seeing some of the things that we're tweaking.

I think one of the reports out there that I saw a couple days ago talked about adding some days into the thing, no doubt I have some friends in the vendor business. The comment I made earlier about Q3 whereas in Q2 on an 84-day quarter, there were 17 less MVM days. In the four-week month of February, 28 days, there were 11 – 10 or 11 less MVM days. In Q3 and that 84-day month (sic) [quarter], less a day or two for holidays there are no – there are the same number of MVM days y-over-y. So again, I can't over emphasize that this is – EDLP is not a word we use a lot historically. We're trying a lot of different things, and again, we think – we feel pretty good about what we've got going forward here.

<Q - Oliver Chen>: Thanks for the details on the roses, too. I like that. Regarding the mailer and the changes historically, what were you seeing with the consumer in terms of the consumer insights that kind of drove you to engage in testing and reacting on the changes to the MVM program? And what are you looking for as it gets tested?

And then as we model the membership fee increases, how do you think that will interplay with store traffic? Do you feel like store traffic will continue in the nicely positive range? Or will there be some volatility and risk we should think about going forward?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: First of all, as it relates to how and when we decide to change some MVM stuff, not that we talk about this all the time but for those of you who have known us, we've talked for the last few years about how we tweak it a little bit. Ultimately over time, there is items that don't get the same annual – not only the same annual sales lift that they have historically gotten but also the additional incremental new potential customers to that given item from the vendors' perspective.

It's not just getting somebody to buy more of something and consume more of something, it's getting new members to do it. So over time some of those things, not all of them, some of them get stale. And we've done some tweaking over the last few years.

Probably six months ago, three months ago, the merchants sat down with the operators and senior people there, and made a choice to do what we're doing now. We knew, and we know it to be most painful in that transition quarter, but again, it's not in our view – again, not to be cavalier about it – it's not that big of a deal other than it did impact some things this way.

And again, we continue to tweak it. And so we're – unfortunately because small basis points make changes on EPS numbers, and we sell it at a nice multiple, I recognize the concern. But we feel we've got a lot of good things going on, and we are pretty optimistic about what's going to go on here in the upcoming quarters as it relates to driving sales and improving earnings.

And again, I can't give you specifics about how and why, but we're pretty also good, as you know, about laying out all of the stuff here, good and bad, and so you can take a look at it. We don't look at this and see it as that big of a deal, and we have tweaked it a little bit. We have added a few more days back to some things. We knew also that again in Q3 it was going to be a lot less than any of those negative impacts as it relates specifically to MVM days.

<Q - Oliver Chen>: Okay, and on the membership?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: And again, I want to get back to the EDLP question, because again, it's not an acronym in our vernacular, even though that's what we do since the beginning of time. When we look at these items and we work with different vendors on different items, sometimes it's let's put a little more emphasis on the MVM, change the pack size, do a greater value. Sometimes it's let's get out of the MVM and do an EDLP and really come to the table with something that is a wow on an ongoing basis.

Again, over not just the last couple of months, but over the last few years we've seen, as we've tried this occasionally, we've seen different things. And again, we feel good about what we feel that we're going to see going forward. We feel good about the lifts that we've seen in many of the things. But we are by no means going to change everything to go to EDLP, which used to be MVM, by any stretch. We think the MVM has a lot of continued potential for us.

And by the way, there are some added benefits to it. Historically in the last few years, our MVMs, I believe there was three days, between the MVMs and the warehouse. When you're talking about lots – one of the things that take up the most room and require the most operating issues in the warehouse is big bulk items like detergents and paper goods and water, and the like. Logistically, we pushed that pretty hard over the years to three days.

One, this gives them a little bit more efficiency in the warehouse. That's not the reason we did it, but that's an added benefit. Two, we've actually put some time in there to do a few other things in the warehouse, whether it's road shows or some other things we've got going on with some merchandise presentation. And all of this relates only to what we do every day. We keep trying new stuff. It's not like, oh my God, something's changed.

<Q - Oliver Chen>: Okay, Richard. Thank you. And what about your digital infrastructure in terms of, is car pickup, and pickup and buy online, reserve in store, as well as your mobile, as well as thinking about the bricks-and-clicks supply chain, what factors will be important over the next few years in terms of making sure you're driving ease, value, convenience as well as being superior merchants?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Well, first of all in terms of pick-and-click, no. Ask me next quarter, but I think the answer will be no for a while. You ought to go see it in some of the other places, by the way. It isn't all that good, and we don't have the room for it anyway.

As it relates – we are doing some unique things with business delivery, and we now have, whatever, 15 or 16 business delivery sites around the U.S. getting ready, or just opening our first one in Canada, I think we just opened our first one in Canada. Probably the single biggest thing is what items we're offering online and how quickly we can get them to you. And I mentioned maybe it was a little bit of a teaser but I talked about online, you'll see some more things coming this CY, probably not until summer, both what we're doing ourselves as well as what we're doing with a couple of third parties, not only in our markets but outside of our markets in Canada and the United States.

Look, one of the things that we all know, we have the best prices on great quality items. And we've never been too good about worrying about how to get it to that end customer a day earlier. We're doing – it's the 80:20 with us. Just in the last six to eight months we've done a lot of improvement online in that customer experience with the smallest amount of effort, the low-hanging fruit. We've got some good things working on, but we're doing these things honestly from an offensive standpoint, not a defensive standpoint.

And I'm not trying to be cute there. I mean, clearly, we want to do it for competitive reasons too, but it's not like we looked at this and we've lost. We see our renewal rates ex some of that auto-bill stuff that we believe – we see our traffic going up still, and online we see our page views and the like going up as well with some of the additional items and the types of items we put on and better communication to our members of what that is.

So I think again, sometimes we're viewed as the tortoise, not the hare. Certainly, over time, we're viewed as being stubborn. I think in my view we're a lot less stubborn but we're still a little bit of a tortoise sometimes, and we've got a lot of good things on going on. And we'll see. Stay tuned.

<Q - Oliver Chen>: [Indiscernible] (1:14:15). The last question, Richard, is on stores. A big topic is a physical stores. You obviously have really superior traffic and a great assortment. So what is your maximum store opportunity in the United States vs. where you are currently? And are there any potential edits to the format? Or is it status quo in terms of what we should think about over the longer term?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Well, I think first of all that every year it seems to occur that we think there becomes a few more locations than we thought were possible. Certainly in the last three FYs, in 2015 I think we opened 21 in the U.S., as an example. And 16 or 17 last year and I think 17, I said, this year. If you had asked me five, seven years ago, I guess we'd be down to 10 or 12 a year.

Clearly, we've gone into several new markets – new for us, not new for the warehouse club industry – where we've done well. Some of them are smaller and take a little longer but we're doing just fine there. I think we'll continue to add – the line will get a little bit more towards that saturation, but a little slower than some might think. And we don't know.

In terms of our basic 155,000 – 160,000-square-foot format Costco warehouse in the United States, I think it's a good guess to assume that it will be somewhere in the mid-teens for the next 10 years per year. I don't know if – three years from now I might be wrong but at this juncture, we're doing a little higher than that, which is a surprise to me. Canada, this year is an anomaly. Opening 8 on a base of 91, but I can remember 5, 8 years ago, I don't remember how many we had, maybe we had 70, we felt one day the market potential for all of Canada could be 90. Now, it's probably in the 110, 120 range, but not 7 or 8 a year. This is unusual but it's good for us. The opportunity has presented itself.

I don't see us necessarily anytime soon doing a unit half the size. We tried that a while back, not to say we won't try something. We do now have, I think we began this year 14 business centers all in the U.S. I think we plan to end this year with 18, one of which is our first one in Canada. Could you have 40 or 50 those in the U.S. one day? We'll see. We had 8 for the first 10 or 15 years before we opened the 9th a few years back. And so I don't know if the 18 or the 17 in the U.S. by FY end will be 25 one day or 50 one day but it's working and we'll see where it goes.

And then the second – then lastly…

<Q - Benedict Shim>: Just a couple of questions. Can you give us an idea, at this point, what your expectations are for inflationary inflation across some of your consumables categories such as food and personal care products?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: I think the collective view is inflationary or less deflationary for the next few months and then maybe a little inflationary but it's a crapshoot.

<Q - Benedict Shim>: Okay.

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: It's based on asking our buyers in different departments. There's nothing widespread at this juncture.

<Q - Benedict Shim>: Okay. Going to your historical experience with respect to membership fee increases. Has 10% been the norm over the last several increases as far as attrition goes?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: I'm sorry, 10% - what was the 10% related to?

<Q - Benedict Shim>: I think you mentioned something like a 90% renewal rate over the last membership fee increase. And I'm just wondering if...

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Our renewal rate over last many years has tweaked up from the high 80s to the low 90s in the U.S. and Canada. I mean, there was a period of time there probably for two or three years that – let's say 3 years, over 12 quarters, it seemed like every quarter y-over-y it was up another 10th, for a lot of reasons. Executive members, as we convert them, they renew at a higher rate. Needless to say, on the co-branded credit card, there is the benefit of auto-billing for those that opt into that. You'll get a little higher rate there. And hopefully, we keep doing things to make you want to renew more.

<Q - Benedict Shim>: Okay. Relative to five years ago when you had your last fee increase, can you describe what the competitive environment was back then and – if you remember and how it might be different now? Does that give you pause or concern?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Absolutely no concern.

<Q - Robert F. Ohmes>: Oh, hey, Richard. I just quickly was curious on an update of your business in China. What you're seeing on Tmall? And if you're any closer to maybe opening a store over there. Thanks.

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: We continue to do Tmall. I think there was an issue with taxes that negatively impacted not only us, but anybody selling, importing into China. There was a 10% increase in taxes. Boy, maybe somebody else shouldn't do that, but there's a 10% increase in taxes. And that impacted again, negatively, some of the imports into there. And it's still relatively small. It's good, but it's relatively small. In terms of us opening in a location over there, you should expect something in the next couple of years.

<Q - Karen Short>: I just want to go to the fee increase. And I'm asking this because I'm wondering if you can give a little color on where your average ticket is with your Executive Members now, say, vs. 2012. Because when I kind of – when I – I, obviously, can calculate what the breakeven spending is off of this new fee. And when I try to kind of back in to how many trips per week your Executive Member needs to be making, you're almost up to once per week to break – for that member to break-even. I may be wrong on the math on the average ticket, so just wondering if you could give a little color on that.

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: We don't give out those numbers, but directionally, I think one of your assumptions is the average Executive Member spends a lot more per visit as well. An Executive or – and a Business Member. They're more – relatively speaking, more of our Business Members or Executive Members as a percent of total Business Members vs. Gold Star, I'm guessing – I don't have the numbers in front of me. And – so all those things play.

I want also add a comment to a question a few questions ago about renewal rates, about how they've changed over time. I have a simple summary sheet here that shows what our renewal rates were. And I only have U.S. and Canada combined, which is again more than 80% of our company. At the end of 2005, it was 85.9%; at 2010 it was 87.7%; and at 2015 it was 90.6%; and at the end of 2016 it was 90.3%. Again, that little delta downward has to do, in our view, with the conversion to the new Citi Visa card and some of the changes with automatic auto-billing had to be redone. And so sequentially, it's continued to go in that direction. Recognizing it can't go above 100%, and jokes aside, it won't get that close, but we think that it's been consistently improving at a level that is consistently good for us.

<Q - Karen Short>: Okay. And then just on e-commerce, I'm wondering if you could maybe give a little color on e-commerce growth rate by categories. And obviously, your growth rate overall trails some of the mass competitors. So wondering a) did it come in kind of in line with where you expected for the holidays and/or what you think you could continue to do to drive that strength?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: I've shared I think a little bit of the kinds of things we're doing from member experience to faster delivery to expanding items. And arguably, letting our members know that we have it. Again, it started off years ago as limited big-ticket items; hard to carry, hard to deliver, hard to install items. And we've added to that. We feel again fine with where we are. Yes, there are bigger increases out there, but I would bet that the investment per dollar of increase is dwarfed everywhere else. I'm not trying to be cute about that because we are investing more in it, but doing it in an offensive rather than a defensive way.

And we still want – we're still a brick-and-mortar entity, and we want to get you in the store because you're going to buy more in the warehouse, you're going to buy more when that happens. And we've got a lot of reasons for you to do that. We also recognize that we don't want to lose a sale to somebody else because they only buy online. And I think I feel and you're going to see some good things continue over the next few years. It's a small – online is a small percentage of our company, 4%, $4.5B or so. It's still $4.5B business growing in the low – well, 11% or 12% this past fiscal quarter and the mid-teens over the last few years in general. And I'm betting that will go up some from that level. But we have to see.

<Q - Sean P. Naughton>: Just on the – just wanted to go back to the merchandise margin. The core merchandise margin up 7BPS in the quarter just on a rate basis. Just this has been going on I think for a couple of years now, and is it really driven by mix or is it some of the fewer promotions you were kind of describing or better deals from your vendors? Just trying to understand how this line item has just been a very consistent march higher, and is that intentional by Costco?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: First of all, it is intentional by us. My guess is that most of it's related to mix. I mean, this quarter a little bit's related to the EDLP and the MVM shift or whatever. But generally speaking – and certainly over the years, increasing penetration of gas. I mean you've got a total company gross margin last year of what approaching 12%. If roughly 10% of that is gas...

<A>: He's talking core-on-core.

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Oh, core-on-core.

<A>: It was up a little better in Q1.

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: I'm sorry. I think that's just the nature of the draw that quarter. Fresh foods tends to be a little higher margin and I think it was down a little bit this quarter. Some of that has to do withholding prices on some deflationary items. A couple of months ago I think it was – there was a bad berry crop. I mean, literally, these are the kinds of things that will impact us when we're such a big player in this stuff. I don't see any big difference there.

<Q - Sean P. Naughton>: Okay. As I say it just seems to me and I'd have to look at the model again this has been a number that's been very, very consistently going up between 5BPS to 15BPS almost every quarter for the last probably 10 quarters. Maybe it's just mix related.

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Well, no, core-on-core is not mix related. It's core-on-core.

<Q - Sean P. Naughton>: I'm just saying within the core.

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Okay, I'm sorry. I misunderstood part of the question. I think part of that is some of the aspects of the components of that. Some of the higher margin categories would be some of the non-food categories like apparel. For those of you who have known us for a while, I think the last three years we've enjoyed probably an annual compound growth rate in our apparel sales certainly in the high singles, maybe 10%. So that's a category that's higher margin to start with. I think we've done a little better job on some other areas of non-foods, but apparel is the one that stands out in my mind as a big example. Fresh foods overall has a higher margin. And even though it fluctuates up and down core-on-core, core on its own core, if you will, it's a higher average margin department. [indiscernible] (01:27:29)

<Q - Sean P. Naughton>: Okay, got it. And then just on new signups and renewal rates, I know millennials are becoming a bigger piece of the store, and I think Craig mentioned something like 44% of new signups are actually millennials now. Can you talk about how the millennials are doing in terms of their renewal rates just overall? And then I guess as an add-on there, is any color on the renewal rates for some of the promos that you've experienced or experimented with over the last couple of years on LivingSocial or in social media, how the renewal rates from those programs have gone?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: I can't tell you the age group called millennials today and how they renew and spend vs. five years ago whatever they were called or 10 years ago whatever Gen Y or Z or whatever it was back then. We didn't keep – we didn't look at that kind of data back then. We have for the last couple years, so ask me in three years and I'll have some good information for you on that.

What we see, though, in terms of that age group that are now called millennials, it's not that different relative to the other age groups today than it was two, three, and four years ago when they sign up. What we see is –we only have I guess two good data points on the two LivingSocial things we did about 2.5 years ago and about a little over a year ago. And we compared them to everybody else that signed up that month by just walking in or going online to sign up.

What we found is due to LivingSocial, and I could be off a few percentage points here, that on LivingSocial it was about in the mid-40% range of those that signed up on the LivingSocial promotional effort that were millennials. And that compared to the walk-ins that was in the mid-30%, maybe 9 or 10 percentage points difference. What we saw in terms of how much they spent over the course of the year, the LivingSocial or the millennials spent a little less each time and actually shopped a little more frequently, which is counterintuitive to me.

And in terms of renewal, they renewed about a percentage point or two higher than the walk-ins in that first year that they had to renew, again, a little counterintuitive to me. Maybe it's not statistically meaningful because, again, it first year, it's one or two percentage points. But at least it gave me comfort, personally, that we're not losing them and they are coming in. And what we've also seen and what we believe when I look at the curve of who spends the most at Costco, they start spending – the peak is – if I separate people from 25 to 80 years old in 11 age groups, the peak is the fifth and sixth age groups, which were 45 to 49 and 50 to 54, and a nice increase going from 35 and 39 up to 40 and 44 before that. In my view, that makes sense. Maybe they're getting married. Maybe they're having kids. Maybe they're getting married a little later, having 0.1 less kids, who knows. But once they do that and then they start making a little more money, they spend more. They have more mouths to feed and they are making more. So again, this is looking at a chart, not doing a lot of statistically significant analysis.

<Q - Sean P. Naughton>: Okay, that's helpful. Last quick question for me, when should we expect the golf ball back in stock?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: When should we expect the golf ball back in stock? Stay tuned. If and when we have it back, we'll let you know.

<Q - Charles Cerankosky>: I've got a question because of what you said about the MVM is counterintuitive. You're very focused, Richard, always on growing frequency of visit, and it sounds like by reducing the days there's the opposite. How do you communicate the other factors you don't advertise to the member about roadshows and new excitement or lower prices in certain key items you're trying to feature?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Okay. First of all, how we do it is The Costco Connection, our magazine, email, and in-store sites. But I've got to tell you, we started this during the hurt first, if you will. This goes back over a year ago where you start talking to vendors and our key merchandise partners and figure out what we're going to do and how we're going to do it. It wasn't like we need to get every reduced day filled with something else. Giving a little breathing room to the warehouses has been a big positive from our operators' standpoint, and again, we'll see how that goes.

So I don't think it was a big surprise. We knew we would get impacted a little bit on the traffic side. And we know – I think one of the comments I mentioned and one of the comments that some of you guys have mentioned or heard through others is that there have been a few extra days added to the starting point. That's correct. If we look back out the next three, six, nine months, the big extreme transition was this quarter, and in particular February. And you won't see that in Q3. It's the same number of days. We'll stay more fluid in the next two to three quarters, and then it's just anniversarying stuff.

<Q - Kelly Ann Bania>: I just wanted to ask about the decision to raise the dollar impact for the 2% reward. I'm just curious if you tested that increase to $1,000, or if you have any thoughts on what kind of impact you think that could have on traffic or ticket from that Executive Member. And then also I guess associated with that, how we think about just the impact to gross margin as that flows through over the next several years. Thank you.

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: First of all, there are a lot of Executive Members. In theory, even assuming the new fee structure of $60 and $120, that $60 means that you've got to spend what, $3,000 more a year to be breakeven on it on eligible purchases. That's not a big hurdle, but there's plenty of Executive Members that don't get near the $750. So there are some that won't have any impact at all. There are others that will be a nice impact.

How we came to $1,000 is not unlike how we decided to do $5 and $10 each five years or six years or whatever, and how we went from $500 to $750 last time. I think again you'll see some other things that will add to the benefit. We continue to have added things to the Executive benefit. Our family bought a Yukon Denali a couple years ago. If you were a regular member, on top of getting incredible pricing on the car, a regular primary member got I think $200 or $300 cash card. An Executive Member got $600 or $700 cash card. Needless to say, that incented people to become an Executive Member. Once they are and they look at what are their rewards, there are plenty of things out there, and we'll continue to add to that.

How it impacts margin, the extra $250, it's relatively small, very small relative to the 35mm people paying $5 and $10 each. Mind you, some of those are Canadian dollars. That's a little lower relative to U.S. dollar, but nonetheless, it's a very small piece of it.

<Q - Peter S. Benedict>: Hey, Richard. Quickly, when you pay down the debt later this month, your leverage ratio drops pretty dramatically. Just what are your latest thoughts around leverage? And if you care to comment on the circus in Washington and what's going on there? Is that impacting your decision on when you might do something around leverage? Thank you.

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Clearly, as it relates to all the proposed tax things, one of which is the ability to not write off interest expense, that is not one of the ones we're worried about. We don't have a lot of interest expense.

As it relates to our balance sheet and leverage, we like to think of ourselves as well-capitalized, not over capitalized. We're cognizant of it. And again, I'm not trying to be cute. We look at all of the components of it, regular dividend growth, special dividend stuff, stock buybacks, first and foremost ramping up expansion. But we're cognizant of it, but again, we're not going to just do something because this is March 15 and we've got to do something.

I'm not sure. Again, stay tuned. Our board meeting meets regularly every quarter, and we just had a board meeting a few weeks ago. We didn't do anything different. We're constantly asked questions about are you going to increase regular dividend, are you going to do another special. Stay tuned. We look at it every quarter and we decide what we want to do. But at this juncture, we basically use cash to pay off that debt, and I'm happy it's the most expensive piece of debt that we have.

<Q - Edward J. Kelly>: Richard, just looking at gross profit dollar growth, I know there's been a lot of talk about margins, but gross profit dollar growth this quarter slowed relative to where you were last quarter. Is that primarily fuel? And asking another way, did you make less in profit per gallon in fuel this year than – less than gross profit dollars in fuel this year than what you did last year?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: I'm guessing we did because when prices go up, we make less per gallon, period. And I don't have the exact numbers in front of me, but let's face it. Three –what was it, $0.06 per share, $42mm pre-tax in the quarter y-over-y, that isn't all gallons, it's mostly profit per gallon. Vast majority of it is profit per gallon.

<Q - Edward J. Kelly>: Okay. So as we think about, I mean, obviously, the Street wasn't really modeling the quarter the way that it came out, but – and there's a lot of talk about the gross margin. But it really seems like it may be around this fuel side with a bit of price investment on top of that. I guess is that fair? And then my question for you beyond that is as we look out into Q3, as long as fuel prices are stable, does this headwind go away a bit?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Bob, what did we do last year in Q3 on gas? Was it still big? I think you'll – it won't be – all things being equal, in terms of the comparison y-over-y, Q1 and Q2 profitability in gas a year ago was outsized big. We were profitable in Q1 and Q2 this year, but again, the comparison was a huge difference. Some of that outsized big became less outsized big in Q3. It was less in Q3, but we don't know what Q3 this year brings. My guess it won't – it certainly won't – well, there's no certainty to anything in life, but my guess is it'll be a little less negative, all things being equal.

<Q - Greg Melich>: I had a quick follow up to that one, then another question. If you're think about penny profit, Richard, are we back in gasoline to where we were a few years ago or could there still be room to go down there? And then my other questions were on deflation. I think you mentioned in February, it was about 50BPS less than in Q2. I'd love to know what drove that. And then maybe a longer-term question, if you just look at membership growth numbers, we had been running close to 7% and it's decelerated to about 5.5% the last few quarters. Could you help us understand why that is and if it's just timing the clubs or what's at work there? Thanks.

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Okay. Greg, I hope you wrote down the numbers because a few people were whispering to me as you were talking. What was the first question?

<Q - Greg Melich>: First question was a follow up on the gas profits. So basically are we...

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Oh, yeah, yeah, we've had about – I don't know if it's a year-and-a-half or two years of outsized gas profits. Is it back to where it was before? Two years of outsized gas profits. I believe so. I don't know if it's a little worse or a little better than two-and-a-half years ago. But it certainly, these last two years have been fun.

<Q - Greg Melich>: Got it. And then the other questions were deflation in February, it looked like it was a – not quite as bad. It was I think 50BPS less deflation than in Q2 –

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: I think you hear that – that's y-over-y. So part of that is just when the relative timing of inflation was a year earlier in those respective quarters. And probably a little of it is some lower pricing on some stuff. I mean again, I used the water example. See, that item's $300mm item and we did more sales but...

<A - Robert D. Nelson>: It was a little better than the quarter, but worse than January.

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: It was – oh, Bob was mentioning in terms of deflation, it was a little better in the quarter in Q2 vs. Q1, but February was actually a little more deflationary than the whole quarter – relatively speaking than the whole quarter, quarter two overall.

<Q - Greg Melich>: Okay.

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: It'll fluctuate again, but I think, again, some of that has to do with pricing on our side. It's not just what the economists are telling us.

<Q - Greg Melich>: All right. And then lastly, on the membership growth, I know it can move around sort of quarter-to-quarter. But if you look a few years ago, it seemed to run sort of 7-ish, give or take, and now it's more like 5.5 the last couple quarters. Is that because we have more in-fills or how should we think about less membership growth, the same sort of club openings?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Some of its related to the cannibalization I mentioned earlier. When you open eight units in Canada this year, there aren't a lot of new markets. We've opening – we've had openings in the U.S. where in a small new market, we could – Tulsa was my extreme example where through opening day we had 22,000 signups – 20,000 plus signups. I member in Tennessee in a new market, we had 10 or 12, which is great. We could open a new unit in LA and have 3,000 signups and it's an awesome location because its existing members shopping a lot more frequently because it's a lot closer unit to them. But they've always been members.

The other thing that'll affect that is international openings, particularly in Asia where we could have during those eight or 10 weeks up through opening day where we do tabling activities. We've had openings of 20,000 to 50,000 – 20,000 to 40,000 signups in those few weeks, those several weeks. So having a few of those change – and again, I don't know if that should help us or hurt us right now, but those are the things that generally impact it. Overall, we feel that we're still adding members. Some of the new markets that we've gone into, Tulsa again was an extreme one, but again, we tend to do well in those.

<Q - Molly Smith>: Richard, I wanted to ask you about the prospect of the border adjustment tax and given that your cost of goods sold about half of that comes from imports. So what have your thoughts been as these discussions continue? Have you tried to lobby with any of these other retailers against the tax? And as well and other changes potentially coming out of the new administration with healthcare, how that may impact your business as well if it all.

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: Sure. Before I answer that just one final comment in response to Greg's question about the increased growth in new members. Or actually not members, but new members but revenue. A little of that probably has been negatively impacted by the auto billing comp that I'd made about the credit card transition. A little bit. I don't know how much but I know that's probably a little bit of that offset, too.

As it relates to the border adjustment tax, there's clearly the people out there that want it, manufacturers that export a bunch of stuff and don't import a lot of stuff and at the very other extreme retailers. Recognizing border adjustment tax is just one element of one version of the tax reform plan that's been put forward out there. The probability of what's going to happen and when it's going to happen and how much of it's going to happen, we don't know. We don't believe it's good for our consumers, it's going to raise prices. And ultimately, I've read articles where some retailers, particularly apparel retailers where 90% plus of their merchandise is sourced overseas. Well, a 20% tax is a 20% tax no matter how much – while retailers generally tend to historically to be full corporate tax payers, us in the mid-30%s and in the U.S. probably a little higher than that, that total company effective rate, it's going to hit it.

And so, if it were to go through, we personally don't buy into the fact that it will be offset by a big rising dollar. We don't know what's going to happen with retaliation out there by other countries, and we'll see. But as a retailer, we definitely think it's bad and we're against it. In terms of lobbying, we're not big on lobbying. We're doing a little bit in that area. Certainly RILA retail industry association is very involved in it. There's an offshoot organization formed, which RILA has certainly a big part of, and we've become part of the Americans for Affordable Products. We've joined that along with many – hundreds of retailers including some very large retailers. And through those lobbying efforts, we certainly support what they're saying and then hopefully those out there that will make these decisions are listening.

We've spent our whole lives driving down prices. And recognizing also that so many items, it's not a question of let's buy them here instead of outside of the U.S., they don't exist here, and that's not going to happen overnight. So it will be a tax ultimately in our view and prices will ultimately have to rise.

<Q - Molly Smith>: Thanks so much. And anything on the Affordable Care Act either or no?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: I'm sorry?

<Q - Molly Smith>: Anything else there on prospects of change to ACA if that impacts your healthcare at all?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: It really doesn't. We have a very good quality rich medical, dental, vision and other plan where our employees only pay about 10% of the total cost. And it's one of the things that sometimes it impacts our P&L a little bit, but it's something that we're very proud of. And so, we really don't have a lot to say about that.

<Q - Joseph Isaac Feldman>: Sorry to prolong the call, but I just wanted to ask could you share any thoughts on the service element of your offering? And I'm thinking about like travel and maybe I know that – I don't know, payroll tax or doing different things, auto sales, and maybe how data mining could play into that?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: All those services we try to not talk about them a lot because we've got a lot of good things going on. They're profitable, they're growing, so many of you have heard me talk to you about challenge you to go next time you rent a car, go to costco.com and no matter how smart you think you are and you'll see what a great value it is. We're doing better at that and getting that word out and you'll see additional services.

As it relates to data mining, we're starting to take some baby steps in that area, but, again, our first and foremost is – we're pretty good at getting on the phone and calling third-party people that we think that can be a good partner to us and we're continuing to look at other things. But, those are all things that will continue, I think, to drive our business in a positive way, but I don't want to suggest we're hiring somebody to do big data mining at this point. We're doing more data analytics than we've ever done and there's plenty of low hanging fruit to start.

<Q - Joseph Isaac Feldman>: Thanks. And then one other question just on IT expenses. I know it's been a drag much of this year, and presumably, it never goes away given where we're headed with technology in general, but is that the right way? Should it annualize at some point and level off or should we think about incremental expense going forward?

<A - Richard A. Galanti>: About 3.5 years ago when we started – when we embarked on this dark journey, recognizing we probably had the lowest cost IT out there. And I always joke, we were the greatest M*A*S*H unit. It was always up and running but it was Band-Aided to death and we made a big investment. We also, during the process, found out what we don't know and what we need to do. And again, it's gone up. I think the best guess four years ago was, incrementally, it might cost in the low double digit basis points to SG&A.

Mind you that every year the denominator of that calculation sales keeps going up, so it's rising. I think, historically, to date, it's probably in the mid to high teens. And it's got a little more outsized this year because some of the big programs have now been installed, notably beginning in this first FY, as an example, our major accounting platform, which is the crux of a lot of things that we'll do on it now. That was $150mm that would then be amortized over seven years. We'll keep it longer than that, but that's we'll amortize it over. But, yes, so that's added to that thing.

I think you'll still have incremental costs and the definition of modernization will evolve also. We keep adding new things to it, rewriting the pharmacy system. There's additional things that will do. So I think it's going to be less painful going forward. This year is a double whammy because you also have some things that impact sales downward, and so that denominator hasn't grown as fast in that regard. But no, I think it's still going to be a drag for a few years. Much less of a drag than it's been.