

Reader's
digest

50 Supermarket Tricks You Still Fall For

Food experts, industry analysts, and store employees share their insider strategies on how to save money on groceries, stay healthy, and beat the supermarkets at their own game.



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We're very aware of the role that the senses play in marketing.

When you walk in the door, you smell bread baking or rotisserie chicken roasting in the deli area because we know those smells get your salivary glands working. When you're salivating, you're a much less disciplined shopper. —Paco Underhill, consumer expert and author of *What Women Want: The Science of Female Shopping*



Joshua Scott for Reader's Digest

It's no accident that shopping carts are getting bigger.

We doubled their size as a test, and customers bought 19 percent more. —*Martin Lindstrom, marketing consultant and author of [Brandwashed: Tricks Companies Use to Manipulate Our Minds and Persuade Us to Buy](#)*



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The more people buy, the more they consume.

If you used to buy a six-pack of soda and drink six cans a week but now buy a 12-pack because that's the current standard size, you're probably going to start drinking 12 cans a week. Be mindful when buying larger sizes to make sure your habits don't change as a result. —*Jeff Weidauer, former supermarket executive and vice president of marketing for Vestcom, a retail services company*



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The average consumer tends to remember the price of only four items:

Milk, bread, bananas, and eggs. Ninety-five percent of shoppers have no idea what all the other items cost and don't know if they're getting a good deal when they buy them. —*Martin Lindstrom*



Joshua Scott for Reader's Digest

The produce department is at the front of the store because...

its bright colors put you in a good mood and inspire you to buy more. That's why I recommend that you start shopping in the middle of the store, with its bland boxes and cans. —*Phil Lempert, grocery industry expert and editor of supermarketguru.com*



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Over 60 percent of shoppers off-load products as they check out.

So supermarkets started making checkout lanes narrower, with less shelf space, which means it's harder to ditch goods at the last minute. —*Martin Lindstrom*



Joshua Scott for Reader's Digest

We let you linger ... and it's good for business.

Customers would tell me as they went through the checkout, "I just stopped in to get eggs," and they would have \$250 worth of stuff. —*Jason Swett, former bagger and cashier at a grocery store in Kalamazoo, Michigan*



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To save money, wear headphones and listen to upbeat music as you shop.

Many stores play music with a rhythm that's much slower than the average heartbeat, which makes you spend more time in the store—and buy 29 percent more. —*Martin Lindstrom*



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Supermarkets aren't out to steal from you.

The average supermarket makes about 1.5 percent net profit a year. To give you some idea of how low that is, the profit margin for clothing stores can be several times that. —*Phil*

Lempert



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Kroger uses heat sensors...

...to track where people are in the store to determine when there's likely to be a rush of shoppers to the checkout counters so that they can get cashiers to the front in advance. —*Jeff Weidauer*



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Please have your money or credit card ready at checkout.

Some stores time each transaction. If you take too long, we get in trouble. —*Aimee Brittain, former grocery cashier, prettyfrugaldiva.com*



William Brinson for Reader's Digest

In my experience, food safety is the biggest priority...

...especially when it comes to produce. Employees were required to sterilize cutting boards every four hours; they had to fill out a cleaning log each time the boards were washed. Some employees would try to get out of doing the dirty work, so it was my job to pop into the department throughout the day and check the log. —*Linda King, former store and department manager for a Connecticut chain*



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One thing that shocked me...

...is that prepared food in the deli area, like chicken or potatoes, is thrown away at the end of the day. Stores can't save it. They won't even give it to their employees. —*Aimee Brittain*



Kang Kim for Reader's Digest

Grocery stores can't compete with Walmart on price.

So what are they doing? Bringing in people who are passionate about food. They're hiring butchers who are skilled at cutting up meat, produce managers who are experts on fruits and vegetables, and a few dietitians who give seminars on healthy eating habits. —*Jeff Weidauer*



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Most grocery stores have a budget for supporting local causes...

...and are interested in being a part of the community. So if your school is having a fundraiser, don't forget to talk to your nearby store. —*Jeff Weidauer*



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You can't win when you're a bagger.

If you put a loaf of bread in a bag by itself, some people get mad because they want it with their other groceries. But other customers get mad if you don't put the bread in a separate bag. —*Jason Swett*



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People believe milk is located in the back of the store...

...so that they have to walk through the aisles to get to it. But the real reason is simple logistics. Milk needs to be refrigerated right away; the trucks unload in the back, so the fridges are there so that we can fill the cases as quickly and easily as possible. —*Jeff Weidauer*



Joshua Scott for Reader's Digest

About 80 percent of what shoppers buy, they buy every week.

Keep your receipt, which shows the item and the price you last paid, so you can tell when something is on sale. That's when you should stock up. —*Phil Lempert*



Joshua Scott for Reader's Digest

If you need a cake, don't buy it the day you need it.

We'll have to give you one from the display case, and those cakes have often been sitting out for a while. If you order in advance, we'll make the cake for you that day or the night before, and it will be a lot fresher. —*Lindsay Smith, former cake decorator and bakery worker at a grocery store near Birmingham, Alabama*



Lucas Zarebinski for Reader's Digest

Believe it or not...

...my years of research have found that the average apple you see in the supermarket is 14 months old...or older. —*Martin Lindstrom*



Lucas Zarebinski for Reader's Digest

Some of the same cheeses displayed behind the deli counter...

...are available in the dairy case. The packaging isn't as fancy, but they're much cheaper. —

Phil Lempert



Joshua Scott for Reader's Digest

The mist that's sprayed on your fruits and veggies...

...may make them look fresh, but it can make them rot faster. The water also adds to an item's weight, so make sure you shake off leafy greens. —*Martin Lindstrom*



Joshua Scott for Reader's Digest

We recycle the vegetables and fruits that don't sell in time...

...by using them in our prepared foods. —*Bradley McHugh*



Lucas Zarebinski for Reader's Digest

In a supermarket, a good sale is anything that's half price.

“Buy one, get the second one 50 percent off” discounts are not good sales—that’s only 25 percent off each. Almost everything is reduced to 50 percent at some point. —*Teri Gault*



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The store I worked at would make some of its sales very specific...

...and, in my opinion, very deceptive. For example, it would offer 50 percent off a ten-ounce package of deli ham and put the sign right between the ten-ounce packages and the 16-ounce ones. Shoppers would wind up grabbing the wrong one and paying full price. —*Jason Swett*



Joshua Scott for Reader's Digest

Customers think that when they buy in bulk, they end up with a better deal.

But that's not always the case. In the produce department, individual peppers are almost always cheaper than those in the multi-packs, and loose avocados are usually cheaper than the ones grouped in mesh bags. —Teri Gault



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The ten-for-\$10 promotion is one of the most effective.

When a store does it, volume takes off, even if the promotion raises the price of something. We'll take an 89-cent can of tuna and mark it "ten for \$10," and instead of buying six cans for 89 cents, people will buy ten for \$10. —*Jeff Weidauer*



Joshua Scott for Reader's Digest

Do not assume...

...that if something is displayed at the end of an aisle, it is a good deal. Often, it's not. Those endcaps are sold specifically to companies trying to promote a product. —*Paco Underhill*



Joshua Scott for Reader's Digest

Just because something is advertised in your grocery store circular...

...doesn't mean it's on sale. There's a whole lot in there that's full price. —Teri Gault



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Grocery stores usually don't have the best milk prices.

The milk at drugstores and convenience stores is typically priced 30 to 50 cents less per gallon; it may even be locally produced and hormone-free. —*Teri Gault*



Kang Kim for Reader's Digest

Do you like the hot pizza from the deli?

It's likely the same store-brand pizza offered over in the freezer section for almost half the price per slice. —*Bradley McHugh, meat manager and deli clerk for an independent grocery store in Ohio*



Kang Kim for Reader's Digest

At the fresh seafood counter...

...most products are labeled previously frozen in small type. Those same products are probably for sale in the frozen-food case for 40 percent less. Not only that, but you won't have to use them right away, since they haven't been thawed out. —*Phil Lempert*



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I've tasted every item in our deli case...

...and there's very little difference between what's been prepackaged and what we slice fresh. A lot of times, it's the exact same product. But you're paying \$1 to \$2 more per pound for the same product just to have us slice it for you. —*Bradley McHugh*



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When you buy fresh bread...

...we give it to you in a brown paper bag. Why? Because the bread may go stale faster, sending you back to the store to buy more. A quick fix: Place loaves in airtight plastic bags as soon as you get home. —*Lindsay Smith*



William Brinson for Reader's Digest

Our French bread was exactly the same as our Italian bread...

...which was the same as our White Mountain bread. They were all made with the same dough and then shaped differently. —*Lindsay Smith*



Kang Kim for Reader's Digest

If we're having a sale on a baked item...

...and you don't need it until the next month, ask if you can buy it now, during the sale, but not pick it up until your event. We let people do that all the time. They bring back their receipt a month later and get their order. —*A cake decorator in an Ohio grocery store*



William Brinson for Reader's Digest

If you see something in the bakery...

...or meat department that will expire the next day, say, “Hey, this is expiring tomorrow. Are you going to mark it down?” A lot of times, they’ll mark it down for you right then. You’re really doing them a favor, since they have to unload it anyway. —*Teri Gault*



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There's a lot that grocery store employees will do for you if you just ask.

The butcher will tenderize meat for you, the baker will slice a loaf of bread, and the florist will usually give you free greenery to go with your loose flowers. At some stores owned by Kroger, the seafood department worker will even coat your fish in flour or Cajun seasoning and fry it up for free. I couldn't believe it the first time they did that for me. —*Teri Gault, grocery savings expert and CEO of thegrocerygame.com*



Kang Kim for Reader's Digest

Is there a product you want that the store doesn't carry?

Talk to the manager. A lot of today's supermarkets will special-order things for you. They'll even arrange to bring something in for you on a regular basis. —*Jeff Weidauer*



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If you can, shop when the store is not busy.

Studies show that most consumers buy more when the store is crowded because they subconsciously want to be part of the group. Mondays and Tuesdays are the best days to shop. Whatever you do, avoid weekends. —*Phil Lempert*



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It's almost always cheaper to buy a large cut and have us trim it for you.

We can cut a chuck roast into stew cubes, a whole boneless strip loin into New York strip steaks, or a flank steak into stir-fry strips. We've had people buy one big roast and have us remove the bone for soup, run half of it through the grinder for hamburger, and cut the rest into a pot roast. That can save you about 30 percent compared with buying everything cut. —

Bradley McHugh



Joshua Scott for Reader's Digest

Just because a cut of meat is labeled Angus doesn't mean it's going to be a great steak.

What you really want to check is its USDA quality grade. Prime is the best, then choice (usually the highest grade available in grocery stores), followed by select, and finally standard. —*Kari Underly, former grocery store meat cutter and author of [The Art of Beef Cutting: A Meat Professional's Guide to Butchering and Merchandising](#)*



Joshua Scott for Reader's Digest

Find out when your butcher marks down meat.

At most stores, it's between eight and ten in the morning. —*Teri Gault*



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One of our best-kept secrets...

...is that you get filet mignon much cheaper by buying whole T-bone steaks. Every T-bone has a small filet mignon on the bone, and a New York strip on the opposite side. The price difference can be \$3 to \$5 a pound. —*Bradley McHugh*



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If you're worried about what's in your ground meat...

...buy a piece of roast when it's on sale and have your butcher grind it up for you in-store. A sirloin roast would be so delicious as hamburger. —*Kari Underly*



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When I was training as a health inspector...

...the instructors beat into our heads how to inspect restaurants. But there was very little training focused on grocery stores. They took us through a grocery store in one day and then turned us loose, even though the stores have all this processing equipment that's tough to clean. And I have to admit, I'd look at some of these machines on my inspections and say, "Yep, looks good." But I didn't really know what I was looking for. —*Grocery store public health consultant*



Craig Cutler for Reader's Digest

When you buy prepackaged ground meat in one of those tubes or foam containers...

...it may have come from hundreds of cows. If just one of those cows had *E. coli* on its hide, it's now in your hamburger. If you ask a grocery store meat cutter to grind your hamburger in the store, it's coming from just one cow. There's still a risk of contamination, but it's a much lower one. —*Bill Marler, food-safety advocate and Seattle attorney who has frequently sued food companies*



Joshua Scott for Reader's Digest

Everyone handles the produce.

I've seen customers drop something, pick it up, and put it back on the shelf. I've seen kids take a bite and put the item back. It took me a long time to start eating fresh fruits and vegetables again after working in a store. —*Aimee Brittain*



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In almost every store we walk into...

...the employees tell us they don't have enough time to clean properly. The result: I've seen some mice infestations so bad that they were living in the dairy cooler. —*Grocery store public health consultant*



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The carts never get cleaned.

I've seen babies soiling carts and carts with chicken juice leaking on them. That's why I give them a once-over with my own sanitizing wipes. —*Aimee Brittain*

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