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Grocery Shopping for Your Health

Colleen A. Hutchinson

Abstract: Grocery shopping is an essential task that plays an imperative role in our overall nutritional health and wellness. However, hidden in supermarkets are psychological traps that make it difficult to choose foods that improve our well-being. Thus, a seemingly harmless grocery store endeavor may actually result in food purchases that are harmful to our health. This article dissects the layout of grocery stores, exploring the clever marketing and advertising approaches that influence our purchases and offers tips on how to healthfully navigate the aisles in order to make healthier choices.

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Are supermarkets as “super” as they make themselves out to be? A large component of nutritional health and wellness begins in the kitchen, but how is the kitchen replenished? Rarely does one think about the process of grocery shopping and the important role it plays in our day-to-day wellness. How would one obtain food without a grocery store? Many people are unaware that the arrangement of grocery stores has a vast psychological impact on customers, affecting behavior and decision-making through marketing methods that influence shoppers’ purchases. According to USC Dornsife, “Learning about shopper trends is one of the best ways for consumer businesses to stay on top of their marketing and advertising approach,”¹ but is it a sure way for those same customers to stay on top of their health? Whether one anticipates that weekly trip to the grocery store or perceives it as a dreadful chore, the truth is that the secret to one’s health and wellness is hidden in the strategic layout and atmosphere of one’s neighborhood supermarket.

There is a reason that the first step in a grocery store is met with pleasant scents. Nicknamed the “decompression zone,” this area encompasses the first few feet after walking through the front door.² Often shoppers are met with floral arrangements and possibly a coffee shop.² Kroger on East 65th and Keystone Avenue in Indianapolis, Indiana mirrors this initial layout. Seasonal bakery items are also at the entrance, which draws customers in and convinces them to purchase these sweets by promoting them as being available for a “limited time only.” According to behavioral psychologists, these tantalizing aromas subconsciously put shoppers at ease, allowing them to “decompress” and fully immerse themselves in their shopping adventure.² Aside from the smells, the attraction of freshly baked goods and colorful flowers are influential sensory stimuli that engages humans’ appeal to visual stimulations. Some particularly aesthetic hues are blue, green, and yellow.³ While green and blue similarly relax one’s emotions, yellow conveys euphoria and creates the illusion of an open atmosphere, where shoppers have free reign over their grocery experience.³ This encourages customers to impulsively buy products they would normally refrain from purchasing in a non-controlled, uninfluenced environment.⁴

With an empty cart and seemingly uplifted mood, shoppers are at the mercy of the store layout. The produce

section is normally near the store entrance, a tactic that convinces one to reward themselves for choosing healthy items by purchasing less healthy items next.⁴ In order to increase sales, some stores utilize sprinklers to lightly mist the fruits and vegetables, lending a fresh-look appeal, while simultaneously causing the produce to rot faster.⁴ This section also contains pre-cut and packaged produce such as baby carrots and fruit.⁴ Although these marketing strategies help make eating healthy more convenient, these products tend to be pricier than purchasing a whole fruit or vegetable. Despite the produce section being perceived as one of the healthier hubs of a grocery store, tempting produce accompaniments lurk, grasping on to the idea that shoppers will purchase a high-fat dip or sugar-laden caramel sauce after making a healthy decision.⁵ Lisa Sasson, a clinical assistant professor at NYU states that, “They’re [the supermarkets] trying to tempt you by offering a healthful food with an unhealthy one, as if there’s innocence by association.”⁵ Interestingly, this tendency is custom in many supermarkets. Nicknamed “vignetting,”⁵ marketers advertise healthy and unhealthy items to be sold in pairs; it is no coincidence that crisp apples are placed right next to a shelf of caramel dipping sauce.

Has one ever wondered why the dairy section is always at the back of the store? This section of the grocery store contains household essentials such as milk, cheese, butter, and eggs. In other words, these are items that many people will just “run into the grocery store for.” It’s the strategic back-of-the-store location that requires shoppers to first walk through many center aisles before reaching their destination.⁶ Therefore, in order to purchase staple items, one must first battle the temptation presented by other aisles, making it very difficult to grab only the shopper’s initial items on the list.

The center aisles of grocery stores mostly contain packaged and canned items.⁷ Specific product placement is critical in this section and is demonstrated through the “thigh to eye” zone strategy.² This area is directly in front of a shopper, offering the most convenient access to items.² However, just because it is in one’s face does not mean it should be in one’s grocery cart. Food displays at the end of aisles are highly coveted by food manufacturers, costing up to \$1 million to display their products at that desirable location.² Despite the hefty fee required to obtain this prime locale, food companies reap the benefits as most

items displayed grasp customers' attention through slick advertising approaches. Catchy phrases such as "Smart Savings" or bribing strategies such as "Buy one get one free" are often employed. Experts have even considered how shopping with children can affect purchases. Take the cereal aisle, for example. Cereal that is high in sugar is placed on lower shelves, or in the line of sight of young children, whereas bran, and other healthy cereals are located higher up on shelves.² Sugary cereals purposefully market to younger customers' attention by associating animal mascots with specific brands, designing cereal boxes with games, and sometimes even including enclosed toys to further persuade children to beg their guardian to purchase it.

Grocery stores are notorious for offering tantalizing samples. Sample stations are commonly placed in crowded areas, which require customers to slowly maneuver around them. This ultimately increases the chance that the customer will indulge in that item.⁴ By providing samples, which are most often processed, unhealthy foods, grocery stores increase sales by appealing to customers. This psychologically convinces customers to purchase whatever item they just sampled because "it's much more difficult to pass up a box of something or a new treat once you've earnestly been offered a taste."⁴ Most often, these items are purchased on a whim and would otherwise not be bought by the customer, had they not tasted it.

Grocery stores are not the enemy. In fact, without them, it would be very difficult to acquire food on a regular basis. It is important to note, however, that grocery stores are corporations with the intentions of reaping profits, and unfortunately the foods that have the largest profit surplus are often the unhealthiest.⁶ Embarking upon a grocery store mission often entails an internal struggle between intentions and temptations,⁵ and the psychological layout of grocery stores has a large impact, and that ultimately affects one's health and wellness through the items purchased. Avoiding the grocery store trap is not only possible, but it has the power to improve one's well-being, and it all starts with a simple grocery list.

It is no secret that many people have a goal of purchasing healthy foods at the supermarket, but the overwhelming environment tends to make that intention difficult to achieve.⁸ Preparing for the weekly grocery store trip beforehand by creating a detailed list helps customers stay on track with healthier purchases.⁶ Not only can it help reduce impulse buys and keep one's kitchen stocked with healthy items, but it can also help decrease time spent in the grocery stores.² Lists allow shoppers to waste less time aimlessly browsing aisles and purchasing unneeded items.³ It also provides the satisfaction of crossing items off a list. Additionally, grocery shopping while hungry is a recipe for disaster, further tempting one to give into purchasing enticing sweets and junk. When the human body is hungry, one tends to lose self-control, particularly when surrounded by food, so perhaps having a small, healthy snack before shopping is a smart choice to prevent surrendering to cravings.⁶ According to the Cornell Food and Brand Lab, those who consumed a Fuji apple before a grocery run purchased 28% more fruits and vegetables compared to those who ate a cookie.⁹

Navigating grocery store aisles with a health-conscious mind is not an impossible feat. Focusing one's shopping around the outer edge of the store, where produce, dairy, eggs, meat, and poultry are located, will ensure that one is exposed to fresh, unprocessed food.⁷ Loading one's cart with wholesome foods initially prevents one from stocking up on those unhealthier options later during the trip such as chips, cookies, and other heavily processed items, which tend to be found in the center aisles.⁸ With regards to packaging, it is important to use caution when reading labels. Many processed foods attract customers' attention through their boldly advertised "health claims."⁶ For example, it is not uncommon for breakfast pastries to brag of containing whole grains or chocolate doughnuts to boast of being trans-fat free.⁶ These ploys convince many shoppers of their claims when in reality there is little to no health benefit in these items.

Hopefully one's outlook on grocery shopping has been altered. The kitchen certainly has a large influence on one's nutritional health and wellness, which leads to the conclusion that grocery stores also affect well-being. However, the numerous psychological traps present in grocery stores can sometimes make it difficult to stock the kitchen with the healthy foods many people intend to purchase. Recognizing these tricks can help one avoid them, make healthier choices, and even save time. After all, that weekly trip to the supermarket is a small task that has a larger impact on one's health and wellness than what was originally expected.

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