



February 1990

Supermarkets Use Varied Tactics to Entice Consumers

by
Jeanne Mackin

Lively, up-beat music plays in the background as hopeful singles eye each other while sampling vegetarian pate and mineral water flavored with lemon. Displays of cut flowers and houseplants add color and fragrance to the scene.

Is this some uptown cocktail party? Not at all. It's your local supermarket offering a "singles night." Supermarkets have changed greatly since grocers in the 1930s first decided to let customers serve themselves from shelves. The average supermarket now is as large as a football field and stocks more than 20,000 different products.

"Competition is heating up for the shrinking at-home food dollar," says Josephine Swanson, consumer educator with Cornell Cooperative Extension. "Retailers are scrambling to attract customers with new selling techniques and store designs." Those techniques may include services and products our parents would never have expected to find in a supermarket, from paying the electric bill or having a prescription filled, to buying gourmet goat cheese just flown in from Italy or renting a movie for Saturday night.

Retailers have learned they can get consumers to spend more money in the supermarket by keeping them there longer. This is accomplished by holding special events, such as a singles night or Halloween party; by giving away food samples so shoppers can taste as they go; by offering more and more products; by setting up lively displays to catch the eye; by designing the store layout as a kind of maze to force shoppers to go more slowly; and by making carts wide and aisles narrow to further slow down shoppers.

Techniques to keep shoppers in the supermarket longer pay off handsomely for the retailers: for every unplanned minute you spend in the market, you spend another \$2. Ten minutes of unplanned shopping can mean another \$20 out of your wallet. New products and a carnival atmosphere further encourage consumers to spend more than they had planned...if they planned at all. Boutiques--free-standing stalls that are more visually appealing than monotonous aisles--offer fresh fish, baked goods, deli-style take out, and other items that were previously sold in specialty stores such as bakeries and butcher shops. One-stop shopping is convenient, but you could also end up paying higher prices for the convenience. Even those free samples may not be so free after all: most people who accept a free sample end up purchasing the product, even though it wasn't on their shopping list.

Consumers can get control over their food shopping dollars and time, despite these megamarket strategies. Swanson offers these tips:

- Make up a shopping list and stick to it. Avoid impulse buying.
- Compare prices. Never assume that the house brand is cheaper than a better-known brand, or that larger sizes are less expensive than smaller sizes.
- Look for, and stock up on, advertised specials...but only if they are items you normally purchase.
- For non-food purchases, see if a different store might offer better prices than the supermarket. Discount stores might be cheaper for household cleaning supplies and other non-food items.
- Attempt to be as sophisticated at shopping as your retailer is at marketing. Try to identify those store displays and techniques that might be prompting you to purchase something that is not the best buy available or that you don't really need.

"Become familiar with the food-shopping options in your community. They'll change as new stores open and existing ones close, or when competition increases or decreases. Be 'tuned in' to what's happening and pay attention to what's advertised," Swanson says.

Resource: Josephine Swanson, Department of Consumer Economics and Housing, New York State College of Human Ecology, Cornell University.