

Exclusive Consumer Research

Supermarket Shopper Traffic

How consumers navigate the produce department and what may encourage them to buy more.

BY KENNETH C. HERBST, PH.D.

Earlier this year, noted industry speaker and author Harold Lloyd and I set forth to study supermarket shopper traffic with an emphasis on how the entire store is navigated by the customer.

In this article, I want to highlight what I believe are the most important produce take-aways. I want you to see and think carefully about what can really affect the way in which your customers shop your produce section.



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INTERACT WITH CUSTOMERS

One (yes, just one) additional interaction with a customer (beyond that with the cashier) is associated with a 23 percent greater ring at the cashier.

It is vital to interact with customers early and often. Saying “Hello” and/or “What may I help you find today?” is one way to let customers know you care and appreciate that they have chosen your store in which to shop for produce. The interaction can, and probably should, go beyond a hello.

In the produce area, there are multiple psychological obstacles facing the customer. One is lack of familiarity with all of the produce on display while another is knowing how to pick the best produce. (“Is this the best peach to purchase at this time or shall I purchase that one over there? What about that can-

taloupe? It feels and smells good, but is it the best one in terms of sweetness and juiciness?”)

Interact with your customer while he or she is in the process of making decisions about which fruits and vegetables to purchase. Many customers do not ask and others do not put forth the effort to track someone down to answer their produce questions. At times, customers can find someone restocking produce but customers are inherently going to do what is easiest for them.

Without assistance from the produce staff in helping choose the best fruit or vegetable or learning how to care for it when customers arrive home, many find it easiest to proceed to another section of the store. The customer moves on with a basket much less full of produce than it would have been if an associate was present interacting with the curious customer who was ready to buy but not confident enough to decide which fruits/vegetables were best. Spending hard-earned money on something that is not ripe or will not be delicious when eaten is quite intimidating.

So, interact with the customer. Have an individual present at the busiest produce shopping times of the day to answer questions about selection and care so that customers can confidently pick multiple types of produce.

OFFER SAMPLES

Sampling is associated with a 34 percent greater ring at the cashier.

While we are thinking about interacting with your customer, there is also a subtle way to make the shopping trip an experience as opposed to a chore. That is, sample your products! Yes, sampling requires a portion of your goods to be “given away,” but you will sell more products in the end if customers are given the opportunity to taste the goodness inside. It also conveys a sense of confidence that you are willing to stand behind your produce.

I have conducted informal research in supermarkets on multiple occasions to examine the

process through which customers go each time they purchase produce. I have also collected an extensive amount of data on trust to look at its repercussions on purchase.

I will put this as simply as possible. Slice the fruit and vegetables, put toothpicks in the slices, put them on a plate and stand behind (literally and figuratively) the produce you sell. Make the purchase of produce an educational and enjoyable experience rather than a guessing game.

Sending a customer home with a pulpy tomato, an overripe watermelon or an orange that lacks the expected juiciness is no way to instill a sense of confidence and trust in your valued customers. In addition, this is not the way to make your customers loyal to your produce in terms of being repeat purchasers with positive word-of-mouth referrals to their friends and neighbors.

If they try it, they will often buy it. Said another way, if you slice and sample, they will come (and often purchase). Sampling forms the bridge between the safe ground ("I just will not buy this today because I do not know if it will taste good or is fresh, and it is safer not to spend my money on what is unknown.") and the other side of the water ("I want to go home with this produce, but I do not know how it tastes. It looks good, but does it taste good?").

When produce is sampled, it takes much of the risk and uncertainty out of the equation. Curtailing risk and uncertainty leads to knowing what type of produce I am buying and what my family will experience when I slice and dice the produce.

PUT CARTS AND BASKETS IN THE DEPARTMENT

Customers using rolling shopping carts spend twice as much as those with handbaskets. Further, those with handbaskets spend twice as much as those customers shopping with nothing in which to place the items they have selected to purchase. Make the rolling carts or handbaskets accessible in the produce area!

Produce shoppers need a place to store what they have chosen. I have walked through the produce section on countless occasions and seen people fumbling squash, eggplant and broccoli in their hands.

They arrived at the squash area thinking they would purchase two or three. But you made the produce look so good they decided to buy more squash and, while there, an eggplant to grill with the steak and broccoli.

Make sure that, at minimum, handbaskets are easy to find and grab in the produce section. Even those with a cart often walk far from it in an effort to squeeze into a busy section in which their cart would not fit. People buy more if they have a place to store items because it frees their hands to

Our data indicate that the usage of store flyers is associated with greater spending in the store.

grab more. Bags are a great way to store produce once home, but they do not free your hands when you are trying to buy multiple types of produce while in the produce area. Make the acquisition of a cart or handbasket simple, and make sure that those shoppers with carts, who go exploring away from

their carts, have something in which to store a great deal of produce.

This data implication taps into interacting with your customers. Perhaps a store associate, looking for those heading away from their carts into the land of produce, simply offers these customers a handbasket.

PROMOTE, PROMOTE, PROMOTE

Ad flyer usage is associated with a 37 percent greater ring at the cashier.

Promotion is vital! Do all that you can to ensure produce is in the flyer in a place that is visible and clear. Seeing customers grab the flyer as they walk in the store (or, better yet, come in with one from the local newspaper) is a sight for sore eyes. Highlight the produce in the flyer and make sure all efforts are made to stand behind it (especially that which is emphasized in the flyer each week)!

I recommend sampling as much produce as possible (If it is not good enough to sample, is it good enough to sell?), but certainly give special promotional attention (balloons, sampling, cooking displays and videos using the produce being heavily promoted) to the produce that is front-and-center on the in-store flyer.

Make certain flyers are not just at the front of the store where customers are often searching for a cart or basket and looking to see if someone they know is in the store. Place flyers all around the store in strategic locations so they are impossible to miss.

In addition, your store associates should know the specific details about each week's flyers (perhaps there is a quiz for the associates on the items in the flyer and their locations).

The winner's name could be written in the break room each week. In general, strive to inform your associates about what is in the flyer and what is promoted each week so they will be ready for the excited customers who want to learn more about the items.

Our data indicate that the usage of store flyers is associated with greater spending in the store. If you give it special promotional attention in the flyer, don't forget to keep it up at the store level. Coming to the store after seeing the succulent peaches and tomatoes in the flyer only to find

EDITOR'S NOTE: We're pleased to present this research analysis from Kenneth C. Herbst, Ph.D., assistant professor of marketing in the Mason School of Business at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA. The piece mentions many interesting merchandising and marketing ideas that deserve further study.

One caution: The piece is based on observational research of current shopper behavior. It is an open question as to what would happen if other shoppers were encouraged to adopt the same behavior. In other words, we can observe shoppers and note that those with shopping carts buy more than those without shopping carts. But it is uncertain what would happen if we handed everyone a shopping cart as they walked in the store: Perhaps sales would increase, as the mere presence of the shopping cart would make people feel comfortable about grabbing more impulse items, or perhaps nothing would happen since those consumers who wanted to buy a lot of items already took carts and those that came to buy only specific items would not change their purchases because of the cart. It is even possible that if a store becomes known for offering a cart to every shopper, it could intimidate some who are looking to buy just small quantities and lead them to shop at another store.

As such, these ideas need not so much be adopted carte blanche as be experimented with. What current shoppers do is a terrific starting point for studying how actions taken by retailers can influence buying patterns in the future.

them treated in a way that detracts from how they were portrayed in print is a sobering experience that can lead to dissatisfaction. So, promote in the flyer and follow through at the in-store level. Help the customer know you stand behind what you sell and your produce will deliver the wonderful message that comes across in the flyer.

SHOPPING LISTS

Shopping list usage is associated with a 41 percent greater ring at the cashier.

This finding is intriguing. In many cases over the years, many have thought that cus-

tomers spend more when they do not come in with a shopping list. Our data indicate people spend much more when they have a list. This is important in terms of its implication for the produce area.

I suggest having a shopping list to hand out to customers each time they leave the produce area. On the list, perhaps you give information on what will be promoted next week at the store. You need some incentive to ensure that customers use the list and bring it with them when they return to the store.

I suggest having a coupon on the list or

some other way of encouraging them to list produce on this specific piece of paper. Divide the list into sections (other than produce to make it more apt to be used) but make sure ample space on the list is given to produce.

In addition to a coupon, include recipes for various salads and fruit dishes with nutritional information. Anything that promotes produce list usage on a weekly basis should increase the amount of produce purchased each trip to the store.

PUTTING TWO AND TWO TOGETHER

Work on selling meals rather than items. As I travel to more and more places visiting produce areas, I see a need to cross-merchandise. Merchandise by recipe as opposed to individual items. Think for the customer as well as with her/him.

If the customer is able to swoop in and purchase six or seven items of produce grouped together as a meal (either ready-to-eat or ready to throw together in a pan), he or she may be apt to purchase more produce. It is easy for people to forget how scrumptious onions can be when served with steak. So, have a sign over the onions (you do not need the actual steak to be present in the produce area) stating "These will be great with steak tonight." The customer, thinking about steak for dinner, now thinks about onions and, in doing so, purchases them as opposed to walking by them without stopping on the way to buying the steak.

I have seen some evidence of cross-merchandising (angel food cake beside the strawberries and vanilla wafers beside the bananas), but there is room for much more. Today's time-starved customer enjoys an easier trip to the supermarket.

You can provide an easier trip while still selling multiple types of produce that, merchandised individually, may not have been purchased because of time or because the customer was not thinking about the recipe the merchandised group of produce readily suggests. The customer thereby purchases more produce than he or she would have if the produce were merchandised separately.

Sampling and interacting with the customer can also decrease uncertainty/anxiety caused by needing to gamble with produce that cannot be first tasted or discussed prior to purchase.

In sum, creativity, imagination, education and interaction in the produce area could lead to a more pleasing bottom line. Instead of selling each item one by one, put two and two together, and observe individual produce items becoming meals in the cart and greater profit for you.

pb

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