

In-store Marketing Induces Impulse Buys

Retailers should support, not undermine, healthy eating, starting at checkout.

- Unhealthy foods dominate restaurant menus, convenience store checkout, and supermarket displays.¹
- The ubiquity of food and beverages undermines our best efforts to eat well.
- Stores are designed to induce impulse purchases; checkout is a prime example of this practice.
- Retailers can support consumers' best intentions by placing, pricing, and promoting healthier, rather than unhealthy, options in the most prominent locations, like checkout.

The majority of unhealthy food and beverages we consume comes from grocery stores.

- Supermarkets are Americans' chief source of food and beverages, providing more than 60% of calories.² More than one-third of these calories come from products high in saturated fat and added sugars.³ The amount of fruit, vegetables, and whole grains Americans eat is well below recommended levels.⁴
- The items a typical supermarket carries and the way stores price and promote packaged goods affect purchase and consumption.
- Seventy percent of the calories children consume from sugary drinks come from retail outlets.⁵



Sugary drinks appear in about 25 different places in grocery stores.

Food companies use in-store marketing strategies—the 4 P's—to push products that consumers did not plan to purchase.

Product

- Food companies use product formulation and package design to spur purchases.
- On packages, companies use color, shape, size, font type, and characters to increase purchases and consumption.⁹ For example, fruit snacks are often brightly colored and shaped like kids' favorite characters.

Promotion

- Retailers use store circulars, shopping cart advertisements, attention-grabbing displays, and "shelf talkers" to drive sales.⁶

Price

- Manufacturers help determine which products are on sale via coupons, two-for-one deals, and other price promotions.⁷

Placement

- The average supermarket has between 30,000 and 50,000 products.¹⁰ The trade spend contracts food companies have with retailers determine which products are in prominent places, like the ends of aisles and checkout.⁸
- One study assessing in-store placement and promotion found that on average, sugary drinks appear in 25 and unhealthy food in 40 different places across the grocery store.⁹



Manufacturers design product packaging to catch kids' attention.

Checkout is designed to drive impulse sales.

- Every shopper must pass through and spend time in checkout which is why retailers regard this space as “beach front” property.
- Ninety percent of food and 60% of beverages at checkout are unhealthy.¹⁰
- Though people can and do resist unhealthy items at checkout, factors such as stress, distraction, and fatigue can make people more vulnerable to impulse purchases.¹¹ After choosing from the tens of thousands of supermarket items, people are more likely to make choices against their best intentions, like buying candy at checkout.^{9,12}

“The food environment has become a tsunami. If it doesn’t drown us, it waterlogs even the strongest of swimmers, who have to exert more energy, be more alert and more conscientious than ever before just to stay afloat.”¹

—Deborah Cohen,
Rand Corporation, 2014

Checkout can be healthy and profitable.

- Food stores should adopt food and nutrition standards for checkout, selling only non-food and healthier food and beverage options near the register.
- Non-food stores should remove food and beverages from checkout. Stores have found a number of non-food items such as magazines, lip balm, hand sanitizers, and reusable shopping bags sold at checkout.¹⁰
- Lawmakers should implement policies that set nutrition standards for checkout, addressing impulse marketing of foods that increase chronic disease risks.



Some stores like this Harmons Grocery sell fruit at checkout.

For more information, see our report at <https://cspinet.org/temptation>. To discuss healthy retail opportunities, contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

¹ Cohen DA, *A Big Fat Crisis*. New York, NY: Nation Books, 2014.

² Mancino L, Guthrie J. *Supermarkets, Schools, and Social Gatherings: Where Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and other U.S. Households Acquire their Foods Correlates with Nutritional Quality*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Center; 2018. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2018/januaryfebruary/supermarkets-schools-and-social-gatherings-where-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-and-other-us-households-acquire-their-foods-correlates-with-nutritional-quality/>.

³ Escaron AL, Meinen AM, Nitzke SA, Martinez-Donate AP. Supermarket and grocery store-based interventions to promote healthful food choices and eating practices: a systematic review. *Prev Chronic Dis*. 2013;10:E50.

⁴ U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2010*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture; 2010.

⁵ Farley TA, Baker ET, Futrell L, Rice JC. The ubiquity of energy-dense snack foods: a national multicity study. *Am J Public Health*. 2009;100:306-311.

⁶ Ailawadi KL, Beauchamp JP, Donthu N, Gauri DK, Shankar V. Communication and promotion decisions in retailing: a review and directions for future research.” *J Retailing*. 2009;85:42-55.

⁷ Glanz K, Bader MDM, Iyer S. Retail grocery store marketing strategies and obesity. *Am J Public Health*. 2012;42:503-512.

⁸ Sorensen H. *Inside the Mind of the Shopper: The Science of Retailing*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Wharton School Publishing; 2009.

⁹ Cohen DA, Bogart L, Castro G, Rossi AD, Williamson S, Han B. Beverage marketing in retail outlets and The Balance Calories Initiative. *Prev Med*. 2018;115:1-7.

¹⁰ Fielding-Singh P, Almy J, Wootan MG. *Sugar Overload: Retail Checkout Promotes Obesity*. Washington, DC: Center for Science in the Public Interest; 2014. <https://cspinet.org/sites/default/files/attachment/sugarovertload.pdf>.

¹¹ Cohen DA, Babey SH. Contextual influences on eating behaviours: Heuristic processing and dietary choices. *Obesity Rev*. 2012;13:766-779.

¹² Bruyell S, Dewitte S, Vohs KD, Warlop L. Repeated choosing increases susceptibility to affective product features. *Intl J Res Marketing*. 2006;23:215-225.