# Supermarket Psychology: How They Use Science to Make Us Spend More

When we enter a supermarket, we are unwittingly subjected to the result of decades of psychology research on consumer behaviour. But just what tricks of the mind are they up to? And what can you do to avoid their spending traps?

Few people enter a supermarket and consistently leave with only what they went for. Be it the box of biscuits on promotion or the sweets at the counter, there’s usually something on the checkout conveyer belt that wasn’t on the original list.

This isn’t necessarily a problem, but there is good reason for it. You see, we’re hardwired to react to cues on our supermarket journey in a predictable manner – and the supermarkets know it.

Supermarkets aren’t designed to simply fulfil needs. They are a carefully designed journey of behavioural cues and sensory experiences with one simple aim: getting you to spend more.

For those of us keen to stretch our money a little further, this is bad news. So if we want to protect our bank balances, we need to understand what tricks of the mind our supermarkets are playing – and more importantly, how we can defend our wallets from them.

So with that in mind, let’s go shopping.

## **#1: Front-of-Store Priming**

Ah, the smell of flowers and the vibrant colours of fresh fruits and vegetables! You’ve arrived.

As you enter your supermarket, you’re greeted by a sensory assault. The bright colours and fresh seasonal scents are designed to lift your mood for the shopping experience ahead of you. Why? Because the science tells us that when you feel good, you spend more.

Psychologists call this effect ‘implicit priming’: where one stimulus influences a subsequent response to another stimulus. Supermarkets have been looking to enhance this priming effect for decades: from working with growers to optimise the [colour of bananas](https://www.fastcompany.com/1779611/how-whole-foods-primes-you-shop) to spraying fruits and vegetables to give consumers the impression they’ve been freshly picked from the farm.

Yet of course, none of this makes any logistical sense. Because while you walk around the store later, stuffing your shopping trolley with goodies, those beautiful flowers, fruits and vegetables are crushed and bruised into submission at the bottom.

## **#2: Separation of Essential Groceries**

After you’ve picked up your fruit and vegetables – and that fresh bunch of flowers that weren’t even on the list – you head off to pick up your next items on the list: milk and butter.

But wait a minute. The dairy section is on the other side of the store. You’ll have to walk past all of the supermarket aisles to get to the one you actually need.  And it doesn’t make much sense to skip all of these aisles. So why not weave your way through the aisles until you reach the promised land of dairy?

That is precisely the thought process for a design that forces us to take this walk through an entire supermarket. There is reason why supermarkets don’t have an ‘Essentials Aisle’. Splitting up the essentials means that if you’ve come for some fruit, bread and milk, you’ll need to walk the full length of the supermarket to get them. And while you do that, you’ll likely walk down middle aisles and pick up higher margin items.

The whole process is designed to ensure you maximise your time in the supermarket. And this isn’t a simple question of more time equalling more spending. No, it’s worse than that. Scientific research has demonstrated that our decision making becomes more impulsive and emotional after a certain period of time in a supermarket. So not only does this longer amount of time in the supermarket mean we’re likely to buy other things, it also means the quality of purchasing decisions diminishes.

Dr Paul Mullins and his team at Bangor University have demonstrated exactly [this effect](https://www.bangor.ac.uk/news/university/ground-breaking-project-to-brain-scan-shoppers-16874) using a brain-scanning technology called functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). In a mock-up supermarket they found that after around 23 minutes, customers began to make choices with the emotional part of their brain, rather than the cognitive part of the brain. Worse still, after 40 minutes – the time taken for a typical weekly shop – they found that the brain gets tired and effectively shuts down, ceasing to form rational thoughts.

All of this leaves us ripe for poorer quality spending decisions as we weave our way through the middle aisles, past the 23-minute mark.

## **#3: ‘Grab-Level’ Big Brands**

Your trolley is half full now. You’re about 25 minutes into your shop and you’ve accepted that you’re probably going to pick up a few items that aren’t on the list. As you weave into the next aisle, you scan the shelves and a well-known brand of cereal catches your eye. You don’t normally buy it, but it’s on a small discount, so you pick up two boxes and put them in the trolley. Your fresh fruit and vegetables, meanwhile, are now fully submerged by all your other items.

Now there’s nothing wrong with the fact you’ve picked up a different brand of cereal. It’s probably great. What’s more interesting is why you’ve picked it up. That cereal was optimally placed at a level identified to deliver the highest revenue generation for the cereal brand. The cereal business paid good money for that premium shelf space for that very reason.

This is again all founded in research on consumer behaviour.  Supermarkets’ understanding of optimal levels and positioning for brands has taken advantage of eye-tracking technology.  In [*The Art of Shopping: How We Shop and Why We Buy*](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Art-Shopping-How-Shop-Why/dp/1907794182), Simeon Scammel-Katz shows through this technology that “we naturally look lower than eye-level to somewhere between waist and chest level”.

As a result of such research, this ‘grab-level’ space has now become the most sought after and expensive retail space for consumer goods giants. Supermarkets and consumer goods companies know it: we’re hardwired to buy more stuff at grab level, despite more economical alternatives above or below on the shelves.

## **#4: Promotional Gondola Ends**

You’ve now packed your shopping trolley generously and you’re on the final stretch. As you weave back through the centre of the store towards the dairy section, you’re greeted by a vast array of promotions on the ends of the aisles. Your brain is tired and the chocolate and crisps appear to be ‘good value’. There’s only one thing for it. You chuck them into the trolley in a heartbeat and push on towards the dairy section.

Those chocolates and crisps are in an extremely lucrative space in your supermarket. Gondola ends are where brands go to get noticed. They are spaces that generate higher revenues and higher brand loyalty, with a bigger premium for the manufacturers.

They also happen to be the ultimate promotional device for capturing weary consumers’ purchases. As Simeon Scammel-Katz outlines in [his book](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Art-Shopping-How-Shop-Why/dp/1907794182), these gondola ends don’t even need to have real price promotions in place. Just the appearance of price promotions is sufficient to drive up sales from these positions.

What’s more, as retail moves forward technologically, these gondola ends are likely to take advantage of digital promotional capabilities. They will capitalise on the science of advertising and even personalise digital content to encourage our tired brains to purchase more.

## **#5: Final Impulse Areas at the Checkouts**

40 minutes after checking your list for your essentials, you pick up the milk and butter and head towards a queue for the checkout. As you wait patiently to load the conveyer belt, your eye is drawn to the chocolates and sweets on the queue shelving. You deserve a treat after that shopping experience, so you grab a couple of bags of sweets while you’re waiting. Heck, you’ll even open a deserved bag in the car for the journey home.

You’ve reached the golden zone, where our propensity to spend on impulse is highest in the supermarket. Our brains are exhausted at this point, and our capability to take rational spending decisions is greatly diminished. The supermarkets have us right where they want us.

And so they lavish the checkouts with particularly desirable products which are harder to resist when we’ve stopped evaluating our spending decisions objectively. They’re simply a nice reward for all the psychological strain we’ve been through on the typical shopping experience.

## **#6: Bigger Trollies, Bigger Spending**

You’ve outdone yourself, filling your shopping trolley to the brim. As you return the empty trolley to one of the bays, you add it to a long line of large trolleys. Alongside this long line, you see a modest number of smaller trolleys. ‘How could anyone fit all their shopping in there?’ you ask yourself, tinged with guilt.

Of course, the larger shopper trolley also encourages us to buy more. According to [Martin Lindstrom](https://www.amazon.com/Brandwashed-Tricks-Companies-Manipulate-Persuade/dp/0385531737), by doubling the size of our shopping trollies, typically we buy up to 40 percent more. Much like using bigger plates for our food, the larger the depository, the more we tend to consume.

## **What If You Did It Differently?**

It’s one week later and it’s time to do some grocery shopping again. But this time you’re equipped with some new knowledge on the psychological tricks that await you.

Before you leave the store, you prepare a comprehensive list of the things you need and you eat a wholesome dinner. As you park up and grab your shopping trolley, you opt for the smaller option – that should be sufficient to carry everything you need on your list.

You enter the supermarket and take a deep inhalation of the scent of fresh flowers. You skip straight past them and pick up the fruits and vegetables on your list, placing them gently in the front compartment of your shopping trolley. They won’t be getting crushed and bruised in there.

As you move through your list systematically, you’re cognizant of the gondola ends and the grab-level brands, but you stick to your guns and race through the shopping list quickly, avoiding any aisles you don’t need to be browsing. Even when you find yourself ‘browsing’, you look up and down, countering your natural inclination to shop at grab level.

You’re about 20 minutes into your shopping trip and you’re already on the last leg of the journey in the dairy section. You pick up some milk and head to the checkout. Your smaller trolley isn’t even full and you’ve got everything you need.

As you wait in the queue for the checkout, you reflect on how much money you’re going to save with your new approach. You pick up a bar of chocolate and add it to the trolley. This time you make the decision rationally.