

The way the brain buys

Supermarkets take great care over the way the goods they sell are arranged. This is because they know a lot about how to persuade people to buy things.

When you enter a supermarket, it takes some time for the mind to get into a shopping mode. This is why the area immediately inside the entrance of a supermarket is known as the 'decompression zone'. People need to slow down and take stock of the surroundings, even if they are regulars. Supermarkets do not expect to sell much here, so it tends to be used more for promotion. So the large items piled up here are designed to suggest that there are bargains further inside the store, and shoppers are not necessarily expected to buy them. Walmart, the world's biggest retailer, famously employs 'greeters' at the entrance to its stores. A friendly welcome is said to cut shoplifting. It is harder to steal from nice people.

Immediately to the left in many supermarkets is a 'chill zone', where customers can enjoy browsing magazines, books and DVDs. This is intended to tempt unplanned purchases and slow customers down. But people who just want to do their shopping quickly will keep walking ahead, and the first thing they come to is the fresh fruit and vegetables section. However, for shoppers, this makes no sense. Fruit and vegetables can be easily damaged, so they should be bought at the end, not the beginning, of a shopping trip. But psychology is at work here: selecting these items makes people feel good, so they feel less guilty about reaching for less healthy food later on.

Shoppers already know that everyday items, like milk, are invariably placed towards the back of a store to provide more opportunity to tempt customers to buy things which are not on their shopping list. This is why pharmacies are also generally at the back. But supermarkets know shoppers know this, so they use other tricks, like placing popular items halfway along a section so that people have to walk all along the aisle looking for them. The idea is to boost 'dwell time': the length of time people spend in a store.

