

Scholarship and Practice

THE MYSTERY OF THE CABINET CASTAWAY: WHY WE BUY PRODUCTS WE NEVER USE

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ABSTRACT

Why do consumers buy grocery items they never use? Advertising and bulk buying are sometimes suggested as prime contributors. In contrast, a study of 412 homemakers shows that most unused products are nonversatile ones that were bought for specific recipes or specific occasions. Because these products were not used immediately after being purchased, they were slowly pushed to the back of the cupboard and forgotten. Specific strategies are presented to help consumers purchase, use, and dispose of products more carefully and less wastefully.

Nearly everyone is guilty of purchasing products they never use. These abandoned products or cabinet castaways gradually migrate further back in the cupboard until they become out of sight and out of mind. For an individual consumer, the money and effort spent purchasing these products is not trivial (Taylor & Todd, 1995), as many as 12% of purchased products are never used and eventually discarded (Wansink & Deshpande, 1994). By understanding why we buy products we never use, we can change our purchase and usage habits to reduce product abandonment, thereby saving money and reducing waste.

The advertising and marketing industry is frequently blamed for the unused products that sit in our cabinets (Harrell & McConcha, 1992; Prince, 1991). The allegation is that ads create needs, and these ads, along with accompanying sales discounts or store displays, convince consumers to buy unwanted products. Yet, although advertising is an easy target, there is little empirical evidence to support this allegation. This research resolves the question as to why consumers buy packaged goods they never use.

Through surveys and interviews of 412 adult shoppers and meal planners, three key

cabinet castaways may be based on examining how the *ability* and *opportunity* to use this product changes over time. Many non-staple foods are purchased with a prespecified use in mind (Wansink, 1994). Should that prespecified usage occasion not occur, the product may not be consumed. If a dinner party falls through, or a recipe is not made, the ability to use that product as planned vanishes or is indefinitely postponed.

Let us consider the product that is bought for a specific purpose and is not versatile enough to be used in a wide range

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questions about abandoned products were examined: (1) Why do people buy them, (2) why don't people use them, and (3) how do people dispose of them? The answers to these questions enabled us to develop strategies that help consumers purchase, use, and dispose of products more carefully and less wastefully.

THE CASTAWAY LIFE CYCLE

People use products when they are motivated to do so, *and* when they have the ability to do so, *and* when they have the opportunity to do so. If all three conditions are not met, the product is not consumed. When a person purchases a product, she or he is presumably motivated to consume it (Prince, 1991). What is it then that causes their motivation to change in that time interval between when they purchase the product and when they return home with it? One possible solution to this mystery of the cabinet castaway may be because one's *motivation* to use the product changes (Batra & Ray, 1984). It might be, for instance, that advertising, packaging, and promotions artificially motivate one to purchase a product. On returning home from the store, the person's true level of disinterest in the product leads her or him to put the product away and forget about it.

An alternative solution to this mystery of

of situations. Once the ability to use this product in the intended situation passes, a narrow window of usage opportunity also passes. Because of its low versatility, the consumer does not, and probably will not, think of other uses for the product unless assisted by another person or by a cookbook with an ingredient index. Because the product is not immediately used, it is pushed further back into the refrigerator or the pantry by more-preferred products. Soon it becomes "out of sight and out of mind." Without being reminded of the product, subsequent opportunities to use the product will be lost because it is not mentally available for consideration. The product becomes a castaway.

Product consumption occurs because of motivation, ability, and opportunity. Some products, such as nonversatile ones, leave few opportunities for use. We hypothesize that products become abandoned because they are specific products bought for specific occasions or purposes. If these occasions pass or if they do not otherwise present themselves, the nonversatile nature of the products leaves them ill-suited for convenient alternative uses. After a period of time, they are pushed to the back of the cupboard by preferred products and ultimately forgotten.

METHODS AND FINDINGS

To understand why consumers buy products they do not use, open-ended questionnaires were sent to 450 consumers who had initially been recruited through a random sample mailing from five states (CA, IA, IL, NH, and PA). Each person was paid \$6.00 for participating. Of this sample, 423 consumers (94%) responded in time to be included in the analysis. Sixty-one percent of those surveyed were between the ages of 35 and 50; 77% were home-owners; 73% had two or more children; 68% were female; 58% were college graduates; 71% were Anglo-American, 16% Afro-American, 9% Hispanic, and 4% Asian; and 53% were from the Midwest, 41% from the East Coast, and 6% from the West Coast. Compared to population norms, this sample was slightly more educated than what would be expected from the basic age demographic.

These consumers were asked to locate a product they had purchased at least six months ago and had not recently used. They were then asked when and why they bought the product, why it had not been used, and what they intended to do with the product now that they were aware of it. Two researchers independently coded these responses into categories with acceptable levels of intercoder reliability ($\alpha = 0.94$). A finite set of responses emerged: there were 12 primary reasons people purchased products, five primary reasons they did not use these products, and three basic plans for disposing of the products. Each product was classified into one of nine basic categories (see Wansink, 1994 for a review). These categories included recipe ingredients, canned goods, household goods, entrees and side dishes, condiments, health and beauty products, desserts, beverages, and baking goods. (Whereas a canned good can be used in a number of different ways, the large number of canned products led us to consider them as a separate category.) Eleven individuals were eliminated because the products they described were received as gifts and were not ones they had themselves purchased.

Of the 412 abandoned products, the most commonly abandoned products were recipe ingredients (18%), canned goods (16.5%), household goods (16%), and entrees and

hot side dishes (15%). The average age of the abandoned products in this sample was 2.7 years.

Why Do People Purchase Products They Never Use?

Recall it was hypothesized that many abandoned products would be ones that were bought for a prespecified use that did occur (such as a recipe, or specific purpose, or a special occasion). Consistent with this notion, Table 1 indicates that 30% (125 of 412 people) identified a castaway that was originally bought for a recipe; 24% identified one that was bought for a specific purpose (such as cleaning a wine stain from the carpet); and 9% identified one that was bought for a special occasion (such as for guests or for a holiday). These three reasons account for 63% of the castaways. When health and diet purchases are included as specific-purpose purchases, 70% of all abandoned products were purchased for specific usage occasions.

These results refute the allegation that advertising and promotions are to blame for products that are purchased and never used. Although sales, trial purchases, impulse purchases, and advertising all influenced the purchase of unused products, they accounted for only 7, 6, 2, and 1% of these purchases, respectively. Such marketing-related factors account for 16% of the total

number of unused items. Although this number may still appear significant, the combined total is less than either of the two leading reasons people abandon products.

Why Do These Products Become Abandoned Once Purchased?

Nearly two-thirds (63%) of the abandoned products in the study were bought for a spe-

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cific purpose that did not materialize. The leading reason that 34% of the products were abandoned was the consumers claimed the desired situation had not yet arisen (see Table 2). This was most common with food items such as recipe ingredients (54%), canned goods (43%), condiments (43%), and baking goods (36%).

Although 20% of the respondents claimed they did not use the products because they were inconvenient, inconvenience might explain why the desired situation has not yet arisen. For instance, the reported inconvenience of preparing a dessert (41%) or baking bread (32%) can explain why the appropriate situation never seems to arise. One may never seem to find a situation where she or he has enough discretionary time to bake or to prepare desserts.

It is initially puzzling that the second most common reason for abandoning a product was a person did not like it (33%). Why would someone buy a product they did not like? Three follow-up focus groups ($n = 21$) that were representative of this population were conducted to answer this question. Their responses indicated that consumers can end up with products they do not like when they purchase the product in large sizes or in multi-packs. They might purchase a product, such as salad dressing, use it once, and decide there are more preferable brands or flavors. Rather than throw it out, a

Table 1. Why People Buy Items They Don't Use

WHY PURCHASED	NUMBER	%
Recipe	125	30%
Specific purpose	102	24%
Special occasion	39	9%
Diet/health	31	7%
On sale	29	7%
Trial purchase	26	6%
Inventory	21	5%
Other	18	4%
Recommendation	9	2%
Impulse buy	7	2%
Response to ad	5	1%
Total	412	100%

Table 2. Why Do People Abandon Products Once Purchased?

PRODUCT (NUMBER)	REASON FOR NOT USING (%)					
	DESIRED SITUATION HASN'T ARISEN	DID NOT LIKE	INCONVENIENT	FORGOT THE PRODUCT	CHANGE IN HABITS	TOTAL %
Recipe ingredients (74)	54%	12%	26%	1%	7%	100%
Canned goods (68)	43%	31%	1%	13%	12%	100%
Household goods (66)	40%	6%	39%	14%	2%	100%
Entrees & hot sides (61)	30%	47%	13%	8%	2%	100%
Condiments (35)	43%	49%	0%	6%	3%	100%
Health (29)	31%	45%	14%	3%	7%	100%
Desserts (27)	19%	26%	41%	7%	7%	100%
Beverages (27)	15%	59%	19%	7%	0%	100%
Baking goods (26)	36%	20%	32%	4%	8%	100%
Average (n = 412)	34%	33%	20%	7%	5%	100%

consumer might believe that the occasion may come, perhaps in the form of holiday guests, where this less-preferred product will go to good use.

How Do People Dispose of Unused Products?

When asked what they planned on doing with abandoned products, Table 3 indicates that 57% of those surveyed intended to "throw out" the product rather than "give it away" (20%) or "keep it" (23%). Of those who said they would keep the product, the aver-

age predicted time until use was 5 months. Even when reminded of the product, most consumers did not plan on making a specific effort to use the product in the near future. They simply expected that the original by-gone situation would again present itself.

Although the large percentage (57%) of consumers who claim they would throw out a product is disconcerting, follow-up interviews provided a more comforting explanation. It would be inappropriate to give remaining portions of an unused product to a food bank if the product had already been

opened. If the unused product is part of a large package or a multi-pack, it may only be appropriate to either use it or dispose of it. Some researchers have hypothesized that the low incidence of donations can be explained by the inconvenience of donating (Harrell & McConocha, 1992). The findings reported here, however, suggest this low incidence can also be attributed to partially opened containers that cannot be donated.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND EDUCATION

Abandoned products and cabinet castaways represent a significant amount of waste. At a time when conserving resources and saving money are of increasing importance, this is one area where waste can be reduced. Waste can be reduced by modifying (1) how consumers purchase products, (2) how consumers use products, and (3) how consumers dispose of products. Through our study of 412 consumers and through three focus groups, specific suggestions were made on how to help reduce the money and resources wasted on unused products.

Shopping Strategies that Save Money

Buying a product for a specific purpose increases the chance that this product will become a castaway if the desired purpose does not arise. How can a person decrease the chance of abandonment?

Table 3. Plans to Dispose of Cabinet Castaways

WHY BOUGHT	HOW DISPOSED OF (%)			
	THROW OUT	GIVE AWAY	KEEP	TOTAL
Recipe (n = 125)	57%	18%	26%	100%
Specific purpose (n = 102)	45%	12%	43%	100%
Special Occasion (n = 39)	49%	25%	26%	100%
For diet/health (n = 31)	81%	10%	10%	100%
Sale (n = 29)	38%	45%	17%	100%
Trial sample (n = 26)	77%	8%	15%	100%
Inventory (n = 21)	43%	10%	48%	100%
Other (n = 18)	64%	7%	29%	100%
Recommendation (n = 9)	67%	22%	11%	100%
Impulse buy (n = 7)	57%	29%	14%	100%
Response to ad (n = 5)	60%	20%	20%	100%
Average percentage	57%	20%	23%	100%

- Buy substitutable products when possible. If a recipe calls for either canned okra or corn, buy the more versatile product (corn).
- Purchase "specific-use" products as close to the usage date as possible. This helps reduce the chance that your plans to use it will not change between the time of purchase and the time of use.
- Only buy multi-packs of nonversatile products if all of it will be used shortly after purchase. Although multi-packs of products offer per-unit savings, those savings are only realized if all the product is used (Wansink, 1996). Buying a four-pack to "save money" will end up costing more if two of the packages are never used.

Usage Strategies that Clear the Cupboard

The key point to remember is that versatility is often in the mind of the consumer. Activities that raise salience and also suggest new uses for the products will help get the product used once the initial usage situation has passed.

- Clear out cabinet castaways by using cookbooks that have food indexes in the back. This forced versatility method is very effective.
- Rotate products from the back of the shelf to the front during cleaning.
- Actively plan new uses for abandoned products. Because many of these products are nonversatile, active planning is necessary to use many castaways.

- Once aware of the product, make a usage judgement. If it can be used, plans should be made to use it. Otherwise, it should be given to a food kitchen.

Disposal Strategies that Reduce Waste

Some consumers reported that they had packed, moved, and unpacked unwanted products with them up to five different relocations. In one instance, a can of sardines spent over 20 years being passed from a grandmother to a mother to a daughter.

- Remember the saying "Month 24 . . . Keep No More." Although the average age of castaways in the study was almost 3 years, some products will have expired by that time and should thus be disposed.
- Donate nonexpired, abandoned products to a food bank instead of simply throwing the product away. Something one person might not want might be quite useful to someone else.

CONCLUSION

Although nearly everyone has purchased a product that they never subsequently used, little was known about the true causes behind these cabinet castaways. Interviews with 412 shoppers and meal planners show that most unused products are specialized or nonversatile and were bought for specific recipes or specific occasions. Strategies and tactics can help consumers shop, use, and dispose of products more carefully and less wastefully. Yet in the end, awareness of why we buy unused products is the best preven-

tion against doing so. When we buy unused products, it is most often a result of our overly ambitious expectations of having enough time to prepare them or having the perfect situation to use them.

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- Lesson plans for this and other related topics can be downloaded from www.KitchenPsychology.com. ■