

Abandoned Products and Consumer Waste:

HOW DID *THAT* GET INTO THE PANTRY?

BY BRIAN WANSINK

Nearly everyone is guilty of purchasing grocery products they never use. The money and effort spent on these products is not trivial — we have found that 12 percent of the grocery products we purchase are never used and are wasted (Wansink, Basel, and Amjad, 2000). To determine what causes consumers to buy products they never use, we conducted interviews and surveys with 412 adult shoppers and meal planners from five states (CA, IA, IL, NH, and PA).

Our key finding was that while the purchase of wasted products is often blamed on effective marketing and clever point-of-purchase displays, most wasted foods were bought for pre-specified uses that did not occur (such as a recipe, specific purpose, or special occasion). When these windows of opportunity passed, the non-versatile nature of the products left them ill-suited for convenient alternative uses. After a period of time, they

were pushed to the back of the cupboard and forgotten. There were a number of other notable results:

The most commonly abandoned grocery products were recipe ingredients (18%), canned goods (17%), household goods (16%), and entrees or hot side dishes (15%). The average age of the abandoned products in this sample was 2.7 years.

Most grocery products (63%) become abandoned because they are specific products bought for specific occasions or purposes. While 30% were bought for unmade recipes, 24% were bought for specific purposes that were never realized (such as cleaning a wine stain from the carpet), and 9% were bought for a special occasion that never arose (see Table 1).

Most products are abandoned because consumers claimed the desired (34 percent) or convenient (20 percent) situation had not yet arisen (Table 2). Consumers abandoned others because they decided they did not like them (33 percent), because they forgot they had the products (7 percent), or because their dietary habits had changed (5 percent).

What can Consumers Do to Decrease Abandonment and Waste?

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 change between the time of purchase and the time of use (Wansink 1996).

Rotate products from the back of the shelf to the front during cleaning, and clear out cabinet castaways by using cookbooks that have food indexes in the back.

Donate non-expired abandoned products to a food kitchen instead of simply throwing the product away.

For More Information

Wansink, Brian, "Does Package Size Accelerate Usage Volume?" *Journal of Marketing*, 60(1) 1996, 1-14.

Wansink, Brian, S. Adam Brasel, and Stephen Amjad, "The Mystery of the Cabinet Castaway: Why We Buy Products We Never Use." *Journal of Family and Consumer Science*, Vol. 92:1, 2000, 104-108.

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Why Purchased	Number	Percent
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%

Product (Number of respondents)	Reason For Not Using (%)					
	Desired Situation Has Not Arisen	Did Not Like	Inconvenient	Forgot The Product	Change In Habits	Total Percent
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%