

Cabinet Castaways

Background

Everyone has bought products they've never used. Consumers are quick to blame advertising and bulk buying but studies conducted by the Food and Brand Lab show otherwise*.

A study of 450 customers found that more than 63% of unused products were actually bought either for specific recipes that were never made or for specific occasions that never occurred. Because these products were not used immediately after being purchased, they were slowly pushed to the back of the cupboard and forgotten.

When people buy products for specific recipes or occasions, they tend to be overly optimistic – believing they will use the product to prepare a gourmet meal, or they think that more people will attend their party. More than 60% of abandoned products were bought for a specific purpose that never happened.

People often lack the time to prepare the recipe or they overestimate the amount of people at their party.

Avoid too many “Cabinet Castaways”:

- Buy substitutable and more versatile products.
- Buy specific products close to the usage.
- Only buy multi-packs of non-versatile products if all of it will be used shortly after purchase.
- Rotate products from the back of the shelf to the front during cleaning.
- Plan new uses for abandoned products.
- Dispose of expired products.

Key Teaching Point

- Cabinet castaways were often purchased with a specific purpose in mind that never occurs – this accounts for more than 60% of those unused products.
- See above recommendations to avoid waste.

Student Demonstration

Have the students write down one thing that they've bought that they've never used. Now have them answer the following questions:

1. How long ago did you buy the product?
2. Why did you buy the product, what was the intended use?
3. Why have you never used the product – what happened?

Now that everyone has answered the questions (give them 10-15 minutes) have a discussion about their unused products. Make sure that you ask them why they think so many consumers have “Cabinet Castaways” in the back of their cupboards.

Explain to the students that most consumers are actually over-optimistic when they purchase a “Cabinet Castaway.” They often believe that they will have more time or that something will happen that doesn't. Your “Cabinet Castaways” are actually the result of unrealized plans.

Wansink, Brian, S. Adam Brasel and Steven Amjad (2000), “The Mystery of the Cabinet Castaway: Why We Buy Products We Never Use.” *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences*, v.92:1, 104-108.

** These studies were conducted at the University of Illinois, former location of the Cornell Food and Brand Lab.*

