

Some hints for the cost-conscious shopper

Convenience, special prices, nutrition, bulk buying, waste, unit pricing, perishable dates - shoppers are asked to weigh the value of thousands of products on a dozen different scales every time they go to the grocery store.

How do most of us decide which items we'll buy?

"If it's attractive and suits our self-image, we'll often buy it on impulse," says Marilyn Gurevsky, of Ontario's Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations.

Experts say that, traditionally, seven out of ten grocery-store decisions are spur-of-the-moment. The key to big sales is giving a lot of people the feeling the product is especially good. Being aware of this makes consumers smarter shoppers.

But to the discerning buyer of the 1990s, looking "especially good" means more than having the fanciest package. A store may sell loads of its plain-packaged laundry detergent if it's priced a few cents lower than the favorite national brand. But, at the same time, sales of phosphate-free soap may knock sales of competitors out of the water if the public is environment-conscious.

It's difficult to carefully weigh the consequences of every purchase. But, Gurevsky says, keeping a few basic rules in mind can help make sure the larder's full while giving you leeway to splurge on this week's spinach-souffle special.

1. Always carry a grocery list - not in your coat pocket but in your hand, and stick to it. Stores stock the most commonly-needed items such as milk, meat and margarine along the outside

walls. To reach basic items, you'll have to walk past lots of aisles of goodies that may tempt you to overspend.

2. Plan a weekly menu and develop your shopping list from that. Don't leave the menu until the night before your shopping trip; add to it over the week, using inspiration and advertised specials as your guide.

3. Wait to shop until you need at least 15 items. The fewer trips you make, the lesser the temptation to buy on impulse.

4. Never shop on an empty stomach. If you're hungry, the displays may make you want three varieties of chips, plus dips, spreads and some pop to wash them down with before you reach Aisle 2.

5. When shopping for necessities, try to go alone if possible. Kids are, of course, the most notorious cookie-culling culprits. But couples taking a leisurely stroll down lamb-chop lane are also likely to make more impulse buys than either individual would purchase alone. If you enjoy taking the odd trip to the grocery store together, allow enough time to be able to compare products and search out new brands.

6. Plan a route through the grocery store when you enter. If you only need a few items, visiting one or two aisles may suffice. Don't look at the aisle-end specials until you've picked up all the items you came for. Many stores carefully place commonly used items at the end of the rows, but the prices may not be bargains.

Also, when looking for a can of peas or any other items in the centre aisles, remember to check

both the top and bottom shelves before you make your choice. Merchandise stocked on the eye-level shelf is what the grocer wants you to buy, and may be there for a number of reasons. The store could be promoting their own or a new label, or they

may be trying to get rid of an expensive line that has been overstocked.

Whatever the reason, the most popular brands or the lowest prices are rarely found on the middle shelf.

To receive the titles of ministry booklets on a variety of consumer issues, ask for a copy of the listing brochure Shop Smart. It Pays, by writing to the Consumer Information Centre, 555 Yonge St., 1st Floor, Toronto, Ontario M7A 2H6.

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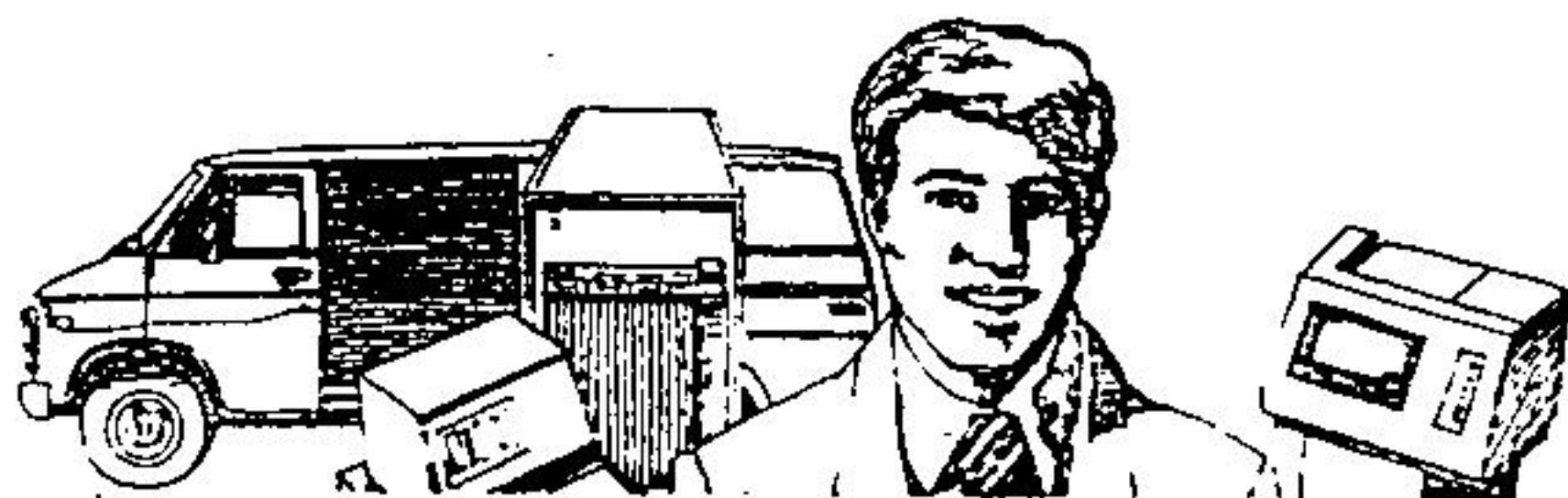
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