

Buyer Behavior Research (Supermarket Cereal)

Location

The research targeted shoppers at a King Soopers supermarket (Coal Mine & Pierce) in Littleton, CO, on November 3, 2019. Considered unincorporated Jefferson County – this area is predominantly white middle class (from fifteen years of observation). There are no major supermarkets in the immediate vicinity (1 mile or less). The nearest supermarkets (other King Soopers stores, Safeway, Albertsons) are 5+ miles away. Alternative stores, such as Walmart, Target, Costco, Whole Foods, & Sprouts, are between four to six miles away. The research was conducted on a Sunday afternoon (2:00 pm) without a predicted storm (pre-storm shopping elicits dense crowds and a focus on non-perishable foods). This King Soopers typically restocks non-perishable goods early Sunday (5 am – 8 am) and perishable foods early on Monday (5 am to 7 am).

Product Category – Cereals

Cereal is located on one side of Aisle 12 and consists of cold & hot cereals, granola pieces, and fruit snacks. The opposite side contains coffees, teas, drink mixes, breakfast mixes (pancakes, waffles), syrups, and protein/energy bars. The shelves were fully stocked and very tidy. Facing the aisle, from left to right, the products were arranged as follows: Generic family-size cereals (in plastic bags), bars, and fruit snacks; brand-name cereals (e.g. Life, Lucky Charms); granola & single-serving cereals; dried fruit & hot cereal (oatmeal); and organic/health-conscious cereals & granola (e.g. Kashi, Bear Naked). Brand name cereals start on the left with kid-attractive cereals (e.g., Froot Loops, Cocoa Krispies). The selections get progressively “healthier” moving to the right of the aisle (e.g., Raisin Bran, Special K). The cereals did not appear to be organized by brand. Captain Crunch (PepsiCo) and Lucky Charms (General Mills), for example, were all together. Kroger brand cereal items were grouped with similar name-brand options.

Cases

Case No. 1: Male, alone, 40s, jeans, flannel shirt. No.1 went straight to Cinnamon Toast Crunch. He carried a basket that contained Silk Almond Milk and Simple Truth Tofu. After cereal, he filled two empty Dazbog bags with coffee beans. After leaving the aisle, he added, oranges, cucumbers, and Elysian Space Dust IPA Beer. He went directly to items and did not peruse other options. He finished at the self-checkout using the store's plastic bags, utilized no coupons (except imputing King Soopers alt ID), and paid with a credit card. He left his receipt in the receipt machine.

Case No. 2: Woman, two kids in a kid car-cart, late 30s, jeans, sweater. Children appeared to be about three and eight-years-old. No. 2 left the cart parallel to the left aisle end cap. She went straight to Cheerios, choosing two boxes of regular Cheerios. She then selected a container of Folgers Breakfast Blend coffee before returning to the cart. The oldest child asked for Froot Loops. She told them there wasn't any (there was) and left. I could not see what was in the cart. At checkout, her cart was overfilled. I could see Wonder bread, Kroger Eggs, Kroger Milk, Charmin toilet paper, generic cola, and Pedigree dog food. She went to a cashier line, used the store's plastic bags, swiped a King Soopers card, did not use any coupons, and paid with a check.

Case No. 3: Woman, alone, late 20s, sweatpants, sweatshirt. No. 3 first stopped at the generic, family-size section. She chose a bag of Malt-O-Meal Cinnamon Toasters. She left the cart and walked to Cinnamon Toast Crunch. She grabbed a box, then put it back. She strolled further to the right looking at cereals before returning to her cart. She stared at the family bulk section (perhaps looking at options). She selected another bag of the Cinnamon Toasters and two bags of Malt-O-Meal Marshmallow Mateys. Then she walked back to Cinnamon Toast Crunch and appeared to be looking at the sale price, then back to her cart. She pulled out her phone and shuffled items around in the cart. It looked as if she might be calculating costs. She then proceeded to select Kroger Dark Columbian coffee before leaving the aisle. In her cart was a Kroger brand pizza, a lot of fruit

(bananas, apples, grapes), Kroger bread, Kraft American Cheese, and Nacho Cheese Doritos. She had an open coupon organizer in the cart and was sifting through them. No. 3 appeared nervous (perhaps because of me), so I did not track her remaining shopping experience. I imagine she might have paid with cash or check, used coupons, a King Soopers card, and the store's plastic bags. No one else was with her at the store, but based on her purchase of four cereal bags, I imagine she was shopping for at least two kids.

Summary

Although I focused my study on cereal selection, I could not ignore shoppers' immediate transition from cereal selection to coffee selection. 90% of those I observed selected coffee and all of them did so *after* choosing cereal. 40% of those observed also selected items from the waffle/pancake shelves. I postulate that King Soopers strategically structured the aisle to encourage multiple breakfast-related purchases, particularly concentrating on a connection between cereal and coffee.

I observed just over a dozen people in the cereal aisle. I anticipated a large number would peruse options and that individuals in the sample group would select a variety of cereals. This hypothesis was incorrect. Case No. 3 was the only person who browsed the shelves. All other shoppers went straight to a specific cereal and selected a single box. Around 75% of shoppers chose Cinnamon Toast Crunch. In this small sample group, Cinnamon Toast Crunch was overwhelmingly the popular choice.

Before the survey, I hypothesized that age, clothing, and cart contents would indicate cereal selection. Based on the items in his basket, No. 1 appeared to be vegan, and I had expected him to choose from the organic, Kashi cereal choices. My hypothesis proved false for Case No.1. However, for Case No. 3, I hypothesized that her overly casual attire and stuffed coupon book indicated a cost-conscious consumer. I was partially correct. Although she appeared to debate the cost of generic versus name-brand cereal, not all her purchases were

generic or store-brand. Her choice of Kraft cheese and Dorito chips might illustrate that in times of economic struggles, consumers assign different weights to products when deciding whether brand or price is of more importance.

Firm conclusion of buyer behaviors and attributes cannot be attained from such a small sample group but can spotlight aspects of the shopping experiences, such as the correlation between cereal and coffee, as well as the initial statistical popularity of Cinnamon Toast Crunch. This study could serve as a foundation for more extensive studies over extended periods and how these trends may differ through various days of the week