



LIFE

Supermarkets Deploy Sausage Stations, Dad Jokes to Lure Male Shoppers

Many men shop as if on a search-and-retrieve mission, but they are less price-sensitive and health-conscious in stores than women, a study found

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By Anne Marie Chaker

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Grocery stores are discovering what women have known for years: Men shop...different.

"Sometimes he'll buy things and I'll say, 'Take it to the office because I don't want it in the house,' " says Leandra Hutchinson, a 36-year-old health-care operations consultant in Ottawa Hills, Ohio, who follows a low-carb diet. She appreciates that her husband, Matt, 40, buys half the groceries since the birth of their second child, Lilly, three years ago. But the fridge can become a sticking point.

"I might pick up a loaf of French bread or angel food cake or doughnuts for the kids," says Matt Hutchinson, a lawyer. "My wife would never buy that."



Matt Hutchinson picks up bananas and frozen corn dogs on an evening supermarket trip with daughters Lilly, 3, and Hannah, 6. Photo: Leandra Hutchinson

As more men do the grocery shopping, supermarkets are taking note.

Lowes Foods, a chain in North and South Carolina, introduced gourmet sausage stations and “beer dens,” where customers can drink while they shop or get a half-gallon jug filled with a craft beer, in 14 locations four years ago. After they were launched, “there was an immediate, noticeable increase in the number of men shopping in our stores,” says Heather George, senior vice president of brand strategy. The male-focused amenities are now featured in 61 stores.

Hy-Vee Inc., a Midwest chain of more than 240 supermarkets, revamped its store recipe magazines this year to include sports stars on covers and weightlifting spreads; past issues featured covers such as We Love Veggies and actress Valerie Bertinelli.

Mega Meat sales, where customers earn gas discounts, are particularly popular, Hy-Vee says. “We have found that is a very strong incentive for men,” says Donna Tweeten, Hy-Vee executive vice president and chief marketing officer. The July flier promoting the Mega Meat event suggests beer pairings.



Customers earn gas discounts during Hy-Vee's Mega Meat promotions, which are popular with men. Photo: Hy-Vee, Inc.

At Alfalfa's Market, a Boulder, Colo.-based grocery-store retailer, the percentage of men shopping has risen to 40% from 30% while the share of female customers has declined, says co-owner Tripp Wall. He is currently expanding the company to 10 stores from its current two, and working with architects to incorporate more of a male point of view into designs.

Based on his observations of customers, Mr. Wall says, men like when they can see the exit, even when they are deep in the middle of the store. He is minimizing visual clutter, creating more straight corridors and lowering shelves by 2.5 feet so shoppers can see around them more clearly.

"It helps this new male shopper navigate and feel more comfortable," Mr. Wall says.

Signs point to man-centric sections—men's heart health or men's facial care—in the beauty aisles, which carry products like beard salves and protein supplements. The meat department offers butchery classes. Stores have even had requests for more-masculine floral arrangements. "Our floral designer has been doing more with willow branches, bark and wood," Mr. Wall says.

New research has found that men who participate in grocery shopping may have better relationships. [A University of Utah-based study](#) earlier this year analyzed data on household work—including cooking, cleaning and laundry—of more than 1,700 couples between 1992 and 2006, and found that most men who participated in grocery shopping reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction than men in couples where women did most of the work.

"Sharing shopping is important to men's assessment of relationship quality, perhaps more so than any other household task," says Daniel Carlson, professor of family and consumer studies and the lead researcher on the study. Many men actually enjoy the chore, Dr. Carlson says. "It gets you out of the house; it's a little reprieve. That makes it very different from other tasks that can be gross or dirty, like cleaning the toilet."

Dad-Proof the Supermarket

Grocery Stores are creating new design concepts, products and programs to appeal to men.

- Lower shelving heights and straight corridors give guys a clearer view to checkout.
- New men's sections near makeup aisles include beard salves and protein supplements.
- Forget the pink carnations: More-masculine floral designs include woods, barks and branches.
- Fewer ads and promotional messages in food aisles, which men tend to ignore anyway.
- Programs such as butchery classes, beer refill stations and gas-discount programs aim to catch men's attention.

Fifty-eight percent of men who do grocery shopping said they believe they are doing the vast majority of it for their households, according to a 2017 study by Hartman Group Inc., a Bellevue, Wash., food consultancy. "Men are making more decisions and feeling more empowered of the shopping that they are doing," says Laurie Demeritt, the firm's chief executive.

Men are less price-sensitive and less health-conscious while shopping than women, the Hartman study found. They often conduct "search-and-retrieve missions," getting in and out of the store as quickly as possible. They tend to load up on treats the household's main shopper avoids and often buy too much or too little, or forget items.

Supermarkets have a clear business rationale for speaking directly to men. "The dad has been the most overlooked population in grocery-store marketing and brand communication," says Elaine Kleinschmidt, an executive vice president at WD Partners, a Columbus, Ohio, retail design and architecture firm. By ignoring half the population, "stores are leaving money on the table," she says.

Experts on families caution that stores pitching to one gender more than the other might not feel relevant to younger shoppers, male or female, who are likely to be new to cooking. "Millennial women have not been trained with the same assumptions about cooking and shopping," says Stephanie Coontz, director of research for the Council on Contemporary Families based at the University of Texas at Austin. "If you've got humorous ways to speak to men and women, you're opening up yourself to men but also many younger women."

At Lucky's Market, a Boulder, Colo.-based grocery-store chain, co-owner Bo Sharon says stores use traces of Dad humor that resonate with women and men. A sign over the kombucha section reads, "We thought it was weird at first, too."



Lucky's Market stores use an injection of Dad humor in their store signs. Photo: TYLER BAILEY/LUCKY'S MARKET

Some supermarket chains are creating new products geared to their growing number of male shoppers. [Kroger](#) Co. has introduced a new men's facial care line called Bromley's. A four-pack of Smooth Operator razor cartridges costs \$8 and can be found in many of the 2,800 stores' expanding men's-care sections.

Jonathan Schoenberg, a 50-year-old executive creative director for TDA, a Boulder, Colo., ad agency, says he grocery-shops at Lucky's at least three times a week—bigger trips on weekends and smaller ones after work.

Mr. Schoenberg says he likes discovering new products and stocking up on foods he really likes. "I buy more meat than I should and too little produce. I'll forget yogurt and granola," he says. "I'll definitely remember sausage and bacon."

Mr. Schoenberg's wife, Megan, a 49-year old magazine photographer, agrees with his assessment. "He is the worst grocery shopper I've ever met. He'll come home with one salami, one apple and beef jerky," she says. "I say, 'That's not really going to work for our family of four.'"

"I enjoy it way too much," Mr. Schoenberg says. "Most supermarkets are pastel colors and sell tons of flowers, and the language is merry-merry, happy-happy," he says. Lucky's "feels like a hardware store with groceries."



Jonathan Schoenberg, a 50-year old father of two, says his nearby Lucky's Market in Boulder 'feels rugged.' Photo: Megan Battle Schoenberg

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Corrections & Amplifications

A four-pack of Smooth Operator razor cartridges costs \$8 and can be found in many of the 2,800 stores' expanding men's-care sections. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that a four-pack of Smooth Operator razor cartridges costs \$10. (July 9, 2018)

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