

# **Solving Consumer Mysteries: The Food and Brand Lab**

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I am pleased to be here in Arizona today, but yesterday . . . for one moment . . . I wished I wasn't here. Yesterday I was to talk to the President's Council members in Tucson. At the reception prior to the talk, I joined in a conversation with two men, and one of them said, "Given how well the football team did this year, I'm disappointed to see that (the Coach) Ron Turner isn't going to be our speaker today." After he said this he turned to me and said, "So, what brings you to Tucson?" [*Laughter*]

But something else happened yesterday that was an experience that made me very proud to be here. Last night I had dinner down in Scottsdale with an editor of a prestigious journal who lives in the area. In talking about the Midwest, he said, "When I think of great Midwestern schools I think of Michigan and Illinois: When I think of Michigan, I think 'Football.' When I think of Illinois, I think 'Nobel Prizes.'"

Now, that made me proud.

## **Part I. Solving Consumer Mysteries**

What I'm going to talk about today isn't Nobel Prize winning research, but it is research we conduct at the Food and Brand Lab to determine why consumers buy what they buy and eat what they eat. The Food and Brand Lab has a dozen graduate students from different areas and a dozen undergraduates who commit at least a year of their time to work on projects that are intended to make people better consumers.

We use surveys, hidden cameras in stores, test kitchens, mail panels, and in-home observation to figure out why consumers do what they do. What we study is basically every day behavior. As a result, we've been pretty lucky to get a lot of media coverage. Last October, however, was a big highlight. The TV show, 20/20 did a real nice special on our research in the same week that another media outlet reported our work . . . the National Enquirer. I was talking to my folks back in western Iowa the week this came out. My Mom said, "Oh, honey two different people called from church to say that they

saw you on 20/20.” And my Dad said, “And five other people called who read about you in the National Enquirer.” [Laughter]

What I’ll talk about today is a few Consumer Mysteries and what we’ve done to try and answer them. As a warm-up, let’s talk about whether large containers make us eat more.

### **A. Warm-up: Do Large Packages Make Us Eat More?**

To answer this, what we did was to travel up to a movie theater in Mount Prospect, Illinois. We then gave people who were going in to see a movie either a medium size popcorn bucket or a large size bucket. To explain to them why we were giving them free popcorn, we made up something like “Oh, hey, this week is Illinois History Week.” [Laughter]

Now little did these moviegoers know, but we had weighed the popcorn buckets before hand, and we had written the weight down on the bottom of the bucket. After the movie was over we gathered up their buckets and weighed them again to see how much each person had eaten. What do you suppose we found? Who ate more, the people with the large buckets or the people with the small buckets?

Exactly, the people who were given the large buckets ate nearly 50% more. But then you all knew that, right? What I didn’t tell you was that half of these people were given fresh popcorn, but the other half were given popcorn that was nearly 3 weeks old. It was terrible. This really didn’t even taste like popcorn anymore. It tasted more like those little Styrofoam peanuts that they use as packing material. [Laughter]

Anyway, half of these people with the moldy oldie popcorn were eating out of large buckets and half out of small. What do you think the results were? Exactly. People still ate about 40% more out of the large containers. Even when we asked them, why did you eat so much popcorn, they would say “I have no idea, it’s barely edible.” [Laughter]

Well, now this is what we’re talking about when we talk about -- Consumer Mysteries. We’ll go over 3 of them:

1. Why do we buy too much?
2. Can labels change the taste of products?
3. Why do we buy products we don’t use?

### **B. Why Do We Buy Too Much?<sup>1</sup>**

Let’s look at why people buy too much at grocery stores. Let’s say we have two signs. One sign “Canned Soup 79 cents, no limit per person” and the other says “Canned Soup 79 cents -- Limit 12 per person.” Which will sell more?

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<sup>1</sup> Wansink, Brian, Robert J. Kent, and Stephen J. Hoch (1998), “An Anchoring and Adjustment Model of Purchase Quantity Decisions,” Journal of Marketing Research, 35:1 (February), 71-81.

Yes, the 12 per person sign. But to prove this, we set up a number of these signs in grocery stores in Iowa. We found that if a person sees a sign that says “No limit,” they buy an average of 3 or 4 cans. If they see one that says, “Limit 12,” they don’t buy 12, noooooo, they buy 7 or 8.

OK, let’s try it again. Let’s say one sign says, “Canned Tuna fish, \$1.00”, while another sign says “Canned Tuna fish 3 for \$3.00.” Which will sell more.

You bet, 3 for \$3.00. Well, we did this up in Chicago with 14 different product categories and found that any sign with multiple units in it ends up selling an average of 30% more. There was only one product category in which it didn’t work. OK, I’m going to tell you what this is and you’re going to say to yourself, “Dumb professor, I could have told you that...” The only category where these signs didn’t work was when selling 30 lb. bags of dog food. *[Laughter]*

Once again, let’s say we put a sign up in a convenience store that says, “Snickers Bars, regular price, buy 18 for the weekend” versus a sign that says “Snickers Bars, regular price, buy some for the weekend.” Which will sell more.

Exactly! Even when it isn’t on sale, we find the average person buying from the “Buy Some” sign buys 1, sometimes two,. The person buying the “Buy 18” sign buys 2, sometimes 3.

What’s going on here is something called anchoring. If I were to ask you how many dentists there are in Phoenix, more or less than 5000, you would say, “Way less than 5000, maybe 1000 or so.” Instead if I were to ask you if there were more or less than “5 dentists in Phoenix, you would say, “There’s a lot more than 5, there’s probably about 200.”

We are highly suggestible to numbers and we are highly biased by our starting point. This influences us when we see a high initial sticker price for a car, but it also influences us when we shop for soup, tuna fish, and Snickers Bars.

### **C. Can Labels Change the Taste of Products?**

How susceptible is our taste? I mean, we know what we like, don’t we?

Maybe not. How many people, really, really like the taste of soy? Well, most people don’t. We did a study – this one even won awards – to determine where putting the word “soy” on a product would change one’s perception of its taste. What we did was to take a couple hundred of these “Power Bars” and create fake labels for them. For 1/2 of them we said they contained “10 grams of protein” and for the other half we said they contained “10 grams of soy protein.” In reality, there is no soy in Powerbars at all, so if they “tasted” something, it would clearly be in their imagination.

So we gave these to people and asked them to taste them. If they had tried the one that that said it contained 10 grams of protein,” the said “That’s pretty good, it’s chocolatey, tasty, and s good texture . . . I think I’d buy it if it were priced right.” In contrast to this, people who were given the bars labels “Contains 10 grams of soy protein,” would try it and go *[makes spitting sound]* “aagh this is terrible, it’s got a terrible texture and it doesn’t even taste like chocolate, quick, get me some water.”



asked the person who answered if they had any products in their kitchen they had bought more than 3 years ago and hadn't yet used. About 93% said, "Only one" and then went to get the product and tell us about why they bought it and why they haven't used use it.

The other 7% called the police. *[Laughter]*

Anyway, it was amazing what people brought and showed us. Things like boiled peanuts, canned okra, quail eggs, Chutney ketchup, and grass jelly –whatever that is. People brought things to the door that had been passed down thought generations, or thing they had moved with 5 different times. There was one woman in Pennsylvania who brought a can of whale meat to the door. She had gotten it form her British mother, who had received it during the rationing years of World War II. *[Laughter]*

What we found in talking with these people was that marketing was NOT to blame. The majority of the products – nearly 70% -- were bought for recipes that were never made or for special occasions that never happened. It's the kind of thing where you say, "Hey wouldn't it be great to have some people over for Beef Wellington next Saturday," Well you buy all the ingredients, and when Saturday comes around, you decide to make pizza or to eat out instead. If you don't use those beef Wellington ingredients, they'll slowly make their way to the back of the cupboard and where they'll sit forgotten or until one moves. In other cases people buy prouducts for special occasion that just don't end up happening. Suppose you think that your niece and nephew are going to visit, and so you buy some candy cane frosting and some of that green ketchup. If they don't happen to come for a visit, that green ketchup will be in your refrigerator until you buy a new refrigerator . . . or two. *[Laughter]*

In general, we've basically our own worst enemy when it comes to buying things we don't need. We generally over optimistic. We think were' going to have more time than we end up having, and we think we're going to have more visitors and special occasions than we have.