

August 27, 2013

Nudged to the Produce Aisle by a Look in the Mirror

By MICHAEL MOSS

EL PASO — Samuel Pulido walked into his local grocery store on a sweltering day, greeted by cool air and the fantasy-world ambience of the modern supermarket.

Soft music drifted. Neon-bright colors turned his head this way and that. “WOW!!!” gasped the posters hanging from entranceway racks, heralding the sugary drinks, wavy chips and Berry Colossal Crunch being thrust his way.

Then he looked down at his grocery cart and felt quite a different tug. Inside the front of the buggy, hooked onto its red steel frame, was a mirror. It stretched nearly a foot across, and as Mr. Pulido gripped the cart a little more tightly, it filled with the reflection of his startled face.

The sight was meant to be a splash of reality in the otherwise anonymous la-la land of food shopping, a reminder of who he was, how he looked and perhaps what he had come in for. And if the spell cast by the store wasn't entirely broken, it seemed to have lost at least some of its grip.

“I'm looking at myself, and thinking, ‘O.K., now what?’ ” he said.

The mirror is part of an effort to get Americans to change their eating habits, by two social scientists outmaneuvering the processed-food giants on their own turf, using their own tricks: the distracting little nudges and cues that confront a supermarket shopper at every turn. The researchers, like many government agencies and healthy-food advocates these days, are out to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables. But instead of preaching about [diabetes](#) or slapping taxes on junk food, they gently prod shoppers — so gently, in fact, that it's hard to believe the results.

In one early test at a store in Virginia, grocery carts carried a strip of yellow duct tape that divided the baskets neatly in half; a flier instructed shoppers to put their fruits and vegetables in the front half of the cart. Average produce sales per customer jumped to \$8.85 from \$3.99.

Here in El Paso a few months ago, the researchers focused on the floor, laying down large plastic mats bearing huge green arrows that pointed shoppers to the produce aisle. The outcome surprised no one more than the grocer.

“In retail, the customer tends to go to the right,” said Tim Taylor, the produce director for Lowe’s, Pay and Save, a regional grocery chain that let the scientists in to experiment with their arrows and mirrors. “But I watched when the arrows were down, pointing left, and that’s where people went: left, 9 out of 10.”

With those same guinea-pig customers, the scientists tinkered again with the cart, creating a glossy placard that hung inside the baskets like the mirrors. In English and Spanish, the signs told shoppers how much produce the average customer was buying (five items a visit), and which fruits and vegetables were the biggest sellers (bananas, limes and avocados) — information that, in scientific parlance, conveys social norms, or acceptable behavior.

By the second week, produce sales had jumped 10 percent, with a whopping 91 percent rise for those participating in the government nutrition program called Women, Infants and Children. Lowe’s was so excited that it now plans to put the placards in every cart at its 22 stores in El Paso and nearby Las Cruces, N.M., and perhaps later at all 146 of its stores.

For grocers, there is one potential glitch: While produce sales climbed in these trials, the store’s total sales remained mostly the same. That meant shoppers spent less on nonproduce items. “They’re moving preference from one side of the store to the other, which is wonderful,” said Michael Kelly, a senior program officer at the [Paso Del Norte Health Foundation](#), which is financing the research. “People still stay on their budgets, get more nutrients and less of the processed — well, let’s just say bad — stuff.”

But the owners of Lowe’s are smiling, too, because along with the meat counter, the produce aisle is one of the most profitable parts of a grocery store, with large volumes and higher-than-average markups from the wholesale cost. So even if sales of frozen pizza and potato chips dip, the grocer’s net profit will rise if zucchini gains.

Finding a profit motive in social policy fits well with the politically conservative views of the researchers engaged in this supermarket manipulation: two Republican-leaning academics at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces.

One, Collin R. Payne, a 38-year-old associate professor, graduated from Brigham Young University and then worked on a string of groundbreaking studies at the [Food and Brand Lab](#) at Cornell University that affirmed a concept known as [mindful eating](#): the notion that if you put food on a smaller plate, you’ll probably eat less.

The same idea, he says, extends to shopping. “The more mindless you are when you shop, the more you are going to be poked and prodded to buy the manufacturer’s products,” Mr. Payne said. “We’re trying to give consumers the same power the companies have.”

His colleague, a Romanian émigré named Mihai Niculescu, 37, came up with the mirror idea by marrying his own specialty in business marketing, known as behavioral choice, with research done by others on self-image. Over a fully loaded Mexican meal at the famed [L & J Cafe](#) here, he said his own sizable belly gave him an insider's edge when studying the marketing cues that lead to overconsumption. "Eating this, I don't realize I'm overweight, until I look at myself," he said.

A [paper the two men wrote](#) last year for *The Agricultural and Resource Economics Review* said the conventional methods promoted in Washington and elsewhere to encourage Americans to eat more fruits and vegetables have either failed, or require taxpayer money at a time when food stamps are at political risk. These efforts include ads and store display signs promoting produce as healthful, and reducing its cost through tools like additional vouchers for low-income women.

By contrast, Mr. Payne and Mr. Niculescu are pursuing a strategy that behavioral scientists call nudge marketing, an idea popularized by the 2008 book "Nudge," by the former Obama administration regulatory affairs administrator Cass R. Sunstein and the University of Chicago professor Richard H. Thaler.

Nudge marketing calls for applying just the right amount of pressure to persuade: not too little, not too much. In the El Paso grocery trials, using both the green arrows on the floor with the green placards in the carts caused produce sales to fall.

"It nudged too hard," Mr. Payne said.

By several measures, El Paso is one tough testing ground for these studies. Thirty-two percent of the city's adults are obese, and 12.2 percent have diabetes, exceeding the statewide average, according to Texas health department estimates. The fast-growing Hispanic population has become a favorite marketing target for processed-food manufacturers.

Much of that was evident at the Lowe's store where Mr. Pulido and other shoppers encountered the mirrors. Many of its customers are significantly overweight, and gravitate toward the chip and soda aisles. As in many supermarkets, the store's produce section, while decently stocked with eye-pleasing displays, gets only about 10 percent of the total space and none of the prime real estate that drives the most sales: the front-of-the-store display towers, which companies rent from the store, and spots by the checkout lanes.

"That's Frito-Lay, that's Frito-Lay, that's Frito-Lay," said the manager, Gloria Narro, spinning around in the center of the store to point out all the displays for that company's snacks. "We're all trying to eat healthier, but there's so much competition for us," she said. "Right next door is a store known for its fresh meat. Walmart is down the street. Walgreens and CVS just opened up, carrying whatever you need in food."

The scientists have other tricks up their sleeves. They recently gave Lowe's a research paper with 56 ideas for increasing produce sales, like putting a rack of onions near the meat counter, for making fajitas.

But it's their retooling of shopping carts that is drawing the interest of marketing and obesity experts alike.

"I think what they're doing is very innovative and clever," said Michael R. Lowe, a Drexel University psychology professor and longtime researcher on weight control. "If you put up some cues that remind people of their weight or healthy eating, without hitting them over the head, they will go and choose healthier items. The mirror might do that, but the question will be, 'What kind of memory association will their body elicit?' And that is hard to know beforehand. For those who are overweight, it might elicit the sense of, 'Oh, I need to lose weight.' Or, 'I don't like to see myself because I'm so big,' which might lead to choosing healthier food."

Mr. Payne and Mr. Niculescu acknowledge that the mirror is still an unproven tool and hope to conduct a formal trial later this year.

They started by placing a full-length mirror just inside the store's entrance, which shoppers either ignored or used for some impromptu primping. The mirrored cart was more arresting, as Kathy Saenz, one of the store's customer service representatives, noticed when she tried the cart out. "My hair looks that bad?" she asked.

Mr. Pulido, who was surprised to see his face in the mirror, didn't comment on his physique, which is fairly trim. But noting the general condition of his fellow customers, he offered researchers a suggestion.

"You should hang it a little lower," he said, "so you show people's bellies."

(Buy Me!)

Scientists are beginning to study ways to get shoppers to buy more produce, but grocers and their suppliers have already spent years perfecting strategies to sell processed foods. Here's a sampling of tactics:

THE SWEETEST ITEMS are sold at eye level, midway along aisles, where shoppers' attention lingers longest.

THE ENDS OF AISLES are huge revenue generators, especially for soda, which makes 45 percent of its sales through racks there, according to the Coca-Cola Retailing Research Council.

IMPULSE PURCHASES (60 percent of purchases are unplanned) can be encouraged by placing items next to checkouts.

FREE-STANDING DISPLAYS are also effective toward the rear of the supermarket and on the left side of aisles. Research cited by the Coca-Cola council shows that shoppers move through the store counterclockwise, from the back to the front; in the aisles, they buy items mostly from shelves to their left.

SPRINKLING THE SAME PRODUCT throughout the store, rather than grouping it in one spot, will boost sales through repetitive exposure.

GROUPING THE INGREDIENTS for a meal in one spot can attract home cooks pressed for time.

POSTING HEALTH-RELATED INFORMATION — online, and on kiosks and shelf tags — can link groceries to good health in shoppers' minds, even though only 23 percent of them say they always look for nutritional information on labels.



OPEN

MORE IN DINING & WINE (18 OF 35 ARTICLES)

Taylor Farms, Big Food Supplier, Grapples With Frequent Recalls

[Read More »](#)