

# What happened to the free samples?

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In this series of Supermarket & Retailer's articles, we share stories of what some organisations and managers have done to motivate and inspire their teams. We give you practical ideas of what you can do to create the most amazing, customer-driven company in the world.

Like any typical husband, I feel duty bound to go shopping with the family, but to be honest, I really hate it. So I've developed a few tricks that help me get through it. For example, if there are magazines on display, I'm the guy you see paging through them endlessly. Or I'll find an interesting employee, and get into a conversation with them. I know that's not what you want me to do, but I'm too old for this lark.

One of the things that made the shopping experience a lot more bearable, however, was that occasionally there would be free samples of Belgian waffles or delicious new chilli sausages. The smells would attract you from afar, even from other aisles, and I was usually there for more than just one little titbit. If I played my cards right, I could



fill up quite nicely, and not have to pay for coffee and cake afterwards. (And, forgive my 'maleness', but the added benefit of these was that inevitably companies hired beautiful, vibrant, young models for the promotions.)

So, in my opinion, free samples were arguably the best part of grocery shopping, and they worked incredibly well.

For a relatively small investment, these tiny gifts create a lot of value for your customers. It's the principle of reciprocity at work again. People love

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The statistics bear this out. Although my figures come from American

and European research, I'm willing to stake my reputation that the same holds true in our country.

For example, the makers of a leading brand of canned 'luncheon meat' found that by doing a special relaunch of their product at 650 stores, sales increased by a whopping 656% in one week, and overall sales by 10% that year. And Marsh supermarkets in the UK found that giving customers a chance to sample products increased sales by up to 20 times!



But there are also other benefits...

- In the case of luncheon meat, the relaunch revitalised a product that had been around for decades.
- Free samples allow customers who are loyal to a competitive brand to try something new – without the risk.
- If you are launching a new product, then free samples allow first-time buyers to try something new, and depending on what research you look at 85% tried something they would never have considered if it was just packed on the shelves.
- In the same Marsh study cited above, a follow-up survey showed that people who tried the free samples were 11% more likely to buy again six months later.

There's also evidence that the opposite is true. When lockdown happened, apart from the fact that many customers' shopping habits changed completely (with less regular shopping trips, more home deliveries and 'pick up and go', and the inconvenience of face masks, coupled with the fear of getting ill), free samples disappeared. For example ...

“ One supplier of hot Mexican sauces stated that sales dropped by 30% after the pandemic stopped samples at the supermarkets. ”

It's logistically just too hard to set up and conduct free samples, so both manufacturers and supermarkets have to reconsider this valuable ritual.



So what can you do as an alternative? How can you achieve the same effect and benefits, but without the hassle of the traditional model? Clearly, new and innovative techniques are desirable.

If the principle is to create positive feelings about your brand, and also to allow customers to feel that they are getting something for nothing, then you could, for example...

- Provide small free samples that are clearly securely packaged for hygiene reasons. This may not be possible for all products, especially those that need some preparation or cooking. But you could do a lot with those packages of mini-chocolates, or one serving of cheese.

- Distribute these where customers now shop. If you do lots of home deliveries or online ordering 'pick-up-and-go', could you include a free sample with every delivery?

- Promote your products in non-traditional partnerships. People are starting to go more regularly to restaurants, pubs (or eat in the company canteen), they stay at hotels, fly on airlines and attend special events. Perhaps you could team up with them to co-promote. (As an aside, we had a family wedding recently – after an 18 month postponement, and imagine what it would have been like if a company had offered to sponsor the costs. Or maybe I'm just too stingy!)



- Another alternative is to include free samples with restaurant deliveries done by the two big delivery companies in South Africa. Clearly, it is prohibitively expensive to hire a courier company to deliver samples to your customers, but there may be some middle ground.
- One major chain of butcheries in the pork industry has a ready-to-eat food kiosk at every

branch. When a product needs to be promoted, they offer customers a discount on the product that has been prepared. It's a great incentive to try something new.

- With lockdown, there also seems to be more businesses that do home cooking for harried people, and I've even seen a meal-kit service in Johannesburg. Tie in with them to give your free sample, or even better, get them to include it in the recipes.
- Don't forget that customers also love feeling positive about you giving back to your community. By stating this on your free sample, "Every bottle bought means we donate a bottle to a needy child."

So the world has become a lot more complicated recently, but the many benefits of free sampling are just too big to ignore. They can get customers on your side, give them an incentive to try something new, and give your rivals a bit of a go. When you combine these with traditional promotional events like contests, it may make your business unstoppable. **SR**



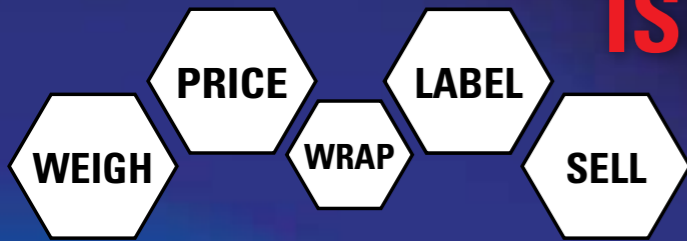
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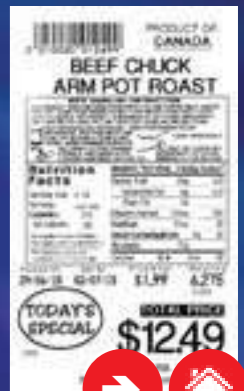
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