

Supermarket special offers exposed

We uncover the supermarket special offers that aren't so special



Supermarket shelves are full to bursting with special offers, but Which? research has found that some of them aren't that special. Our three-month investigation found offers that broke the government guidelines and could mislead consumers.

New rules

We bought the same basket of food once a week in the major supermarkets, and tracked the price of more than 100 wines online. This was to test the new government guidelines, introduced in May, which are intended to ensure that offers don't mislead you.

Trading standards pricing expert Martin Fisher explains the rules: 'Immediately before an item goes on offer, it should be at the higher price for

IN BRIEF

In this report we help you to:

- decide whether special offers really are good value for money
- avoid offers that could leave you out of pocket
- reduce food waste, which can be caused by buy-one-get-one-free offers.

28 days in that store. In the long run, it shouldn't be on offer for longer than it's been at the higher price. That's unless the supermarket displays a sign saying otherwise. The only other exception is if something is going out of date.'

These rules differ from the old ones because previously items didn't have to be at the higher price for as long as they are on offer. The rules are also tighter with regard to perishable goods.

Not-so-special offers

We found several offers that broke the guidelines, including:

- Sainsbury's wine that was only at the higher price for a week in two months.
- Waitrose blueberries that were only at the higher price for two weeks before being sold at half price for six weeks.
- M&S cherries that were sold as 'half price' – but had only been sold at the higher price for 17 days, a whole month

before the offer.

While not all offers broke the rules, others could hardly be described as 'special'. For instance:

- Sainsbury's cherries that were sold at half price for weeks. A sign said they were at the higher price for seven days.
- Strawberries and bacon that were on offer for the whole of our three-month investigation. Full results are on page 24.

Your views

According to our survey, nearly three quarters of you think special offers are good value – though our research shows that sometimes this isn't the case. More than half of you often buy things you weren't intending to, because they are on offer.

We did find lots of products that complied with the rules, but we think there's more work to be done to make sure that special offers are always genuine.

OUR RESEARCH

We tracked the price of a basket of food items between June and August 2008 in Tesco, Waitrose, Sainsbury's, Asda, Morrisons and Marks & Spencer, and more than 100 wines online at Tesco and Sainsbury's in July and August. We asked 3,039 Which? online panel members their views on special offers in April and May.



Which? online Consumer protection

Confused about what shops can and can't do? Go to www.which.co.uk/consumerprotection for a guide to the practices that companies are banned from using under the new Consumer Protection Regulations.

The worst offenders: offers that could leave you confused

OFFERS THAT BROKE THE GUIDELINES

According to Trading Standards, these offers do not comply with the new government guidelines – we think they could be misleading

Supermarket	Product	Higher price	Offer price	What we found
Marks & Spencer	Cherries, 350g 	£2.99	£2.49	Marked as 'half price' at £2.49, which implies a saving of £2.49 – but you're actually saving only 50p on the previous price of £2.99, and even then you could get two for £5 in a multibuy. M&S said they had been £4.99 a month before.
Sainsbury's	Blueberries, 225g 	£3.99	£1.99	Bought at 'half price' for five weeks, but even when they were at the higher price of £3.99 (which was for two weeks only) they were available as a multibuy priced at 'two for £5'.
Sainsbury's	Gallo Cabernet Zinfandel and Chardonnay Sauvignon 	£4.99	£3.99	Recorded as '£1 off' for five weeks, then briefly returned to the higher price of £4.99 for one week – before going back to £1 off.
Sainsbury's	Jacobs Creek Chardonnay 	£6.79	£4.79	Only recorded at £6.79 for two non-consecutive weeks in 10 weeks.
Waitrose	Blueberries, 225g 	£3.99	£1.99	These were bought at 'half price' for six weeks, but had been at the higher price for only two weeks beforehand.

OFFERS THAT NEEDED A SIGN TO EXPLAIN THEM

The offers below complied with the guidelines, but only because there was a sign explaining the offer to consumers

Supermarket	Product	Higher price	Offer price	What we found
Morrisons	King prawns, large king prawns 	£5.50 to £3.79	£2.79 to £1.79	Always at 'half price' ^a . A sign said they had been at the higher price in other stores, but not this one.
Sainsbury's	Cherries, 300g 	£3.99	£1.99	'Half price' for six weeks. A sign said that they had been at the higher price for only seven days.

SPECIAL OFFERS THAT LASTED FOR THREE MONTHS

These items were on offer for the whole of our three-month investigation, or for all the time they were available

Supermarket	Product	Higher price	Offer price	What we found
Marks & Spencer	British outdoor bred unsmoked back bacon, 200g 	£3.69	£3.19	50p off for three months ^b .
Waitrose	Strawberries, 450g 	£3.99	£1.99	On offer for 12 weeks – 'half price' for 11 weeks and multibuy for the next week.
Waitrose	Waitrose cherries, 600g 	£7.99	£5.59 or £3.99	On offer for eight weeks and then unavailable.
Tesco	Strawberries, 454g 	£3.99	£1.99	These were on offer for the whole three months, including nine weeks at 'half price'.

Fruit varieties and country of origin varied for some fruit products. ^a The type varied ^b Unavailable for two weeks

Tricks to get your trade

Have you ever wondered why there's not much on your left when you walk into a supermarket? It's no accident. Jeff Bray, senior lecturer in retail at Bournemouth University, explains how supermarkets convince us to buy more special offers.

1 'When we walk into a shop, 70% of us look to the right,' says Jeff, 'so the strongest offers are often there.' If you look next time you shop, you'll find there's probably very little on the left.

2 Manufacturers use large, brightly coloured signs on the shelves and hanging from the ceiling, as these make us think that the offer's significant. 'Once we see the sign, we don't always check how much we're saving, so companies use these even if you're only saving a few pence,' says Jeff.

3 If the offer requires you to send off for your discount – for instance, you send the manufacturer a voucher from the packet and they'll send you £1 back – then Jeff says to think twice: 'Research suggests that only 4% of us actually send off for the money back.'

4 Experts used to say that offers were on gondola ends (the ends of supermarket aisles) because your trolley causes you to slow down – so you're more likely to notice the products there. However, research now shows that we spend most of our time in supermarkets staring at the floor. Jeff says: 'Don't be surprised if you start seeing offers advertised under your feet!'

Multibuy offers add to waste

Three in 10 members said that buy-one-get-one-free (Bogof) offers cause them to throw food away.

In the UK we waste 6.7m tonnes of food a year – roughly a third of everything we buy. This includes 5.1m potatoes, 4.4m apples and 1m slices of ham every day.



Families with children waste an average of £610 a year on food that ends up being thrown away. So instead of overloading yourself with Bogof deals you can't use, save money by only buying what you need.

While Bogof tins of cat food may last for ages, consider whether you can use the fresh food you buy before taking advantage of a Bogof offer.

If you find yourself with an overflowing fridge and cupboards, try these tips:

1 ZERO WASTE For tips to help you reduce food waste, log on to www.lovefoodhatewaste.com. The site is packed with practical advice on keeping food fresher for longer, plus a range of recipes that use leftovers. Try using their portion planner which suggests how much to cook, depending on who's coming for dinner, and ways to measure it.

2 CHECK USE-BY DATES Regularly check the use-by dates of what's in your fridge so you can use up things that are near to going off.

3 FREEZE IT If you're unable to use food before it goes out of date, put it in the freezer. Many foods can be frozen, including bread, meat, fish and soup.

Supermarkets respond to our findings

Waitrose

'It is never our intention to mislead customers, but to offer excellent value for money. In light of these findings we'll be reviewing our approach to special offers.'

Sainsbury's

'We always strive to meet the voluntary guidelines and would not at any time seek to mislead customers. Your report has highlighted a few incidents where signage had not been updated and training will be repeated to avoid this happening in future.'

TESCO

'We have clear policies in place to follow the guidelines, and all our offers and savings are genuine. Competition among retailers is strong and we're absolutely focused on

delivering the best value while following regulations. It's good to have these findings so that we can continue to fulfil our obligations.'

MORRISONS

'All three types of prawn were at the higher price in over 70 stores, just never the store you bought them in. There would have been a sign saying this.'

MARKS & SPENCER

'We always aim to offer our customers excellent value and follow guidelines on promotions wherever possible. For the bacon, unfortunately we made a mistake with the ticketing of this product and apologise to our customers. We rectified it straight away.'

THE VIEW FROM TRADING STANDARDS

Avoid misleading offers and be a canny shopper

We gave our results to trading standards officer Martin Fisher, who highlighted those offers he felt did not comply with the special offers guidelines.

He said: 'The results strongly suggest that there's plenty more work to be done in getting supermarkets to comply with the rules.'

He also said that even some offers that complied with the

rules were still worrying – for instance, if the supermarket put up a sign saying that the higher price only applied for a very short time.

Martin thinks that special offers encourage us to spend more than we would otherwise, which can mean we make bad choices. His advice about being a canny shopper is simple: 'We tend to buy on



"biggest discount" rather than "cheapest". Just because it's 70% off doesn't mean it's cheap, so shop around.'

WHICH? SAYS

We all like to find a good deal, but our findings show that consumers could be misled, and that not all offers are as good as they seem.

We think that supermarkets need to make sure they comply with the new guidelines and the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008. We'd like to see them complying with the spirit, not just the letter, of the law.

If you see pricing that you think is misleading, contact Consumer Direct on 0845 404 0506.