

Draft findings of the WasteProm ‘supermarket study’

Food waste is a problem with dire environmental, societal and economic consequences. A significant part of food waste happens at the retail stage and is attributed to foods that are discarded because they cannot be sold before their expiration date. In order to tackle this issue, retail chains have developed an initiative to sell food items before they expire: They sell these close-to-date foods in designated areas in the supermarket dedicated to “Save the food” (*Red Maden*). Here, foods, in particular those close to expiring (the so-called suboptimal foods), are offered at reduced prices. These items are attractive for consumers because they are not only cheap, but they also help reduce food waste and thus cater to their environmental concern. However, it has been questioned whether all of the suboptimal foods bought are actually consumed in the households, or whether many of these in fact end up being thrown away by consumers. If the latter is the case, the problem of food waste would merely have been moved from the retailer to the household level.

Therefore, the WasteProm team at the MAPP Center at Aarhus University/BSS conducted a study in order to investigate what happens with these foods after purchase, as well as what are the characteristics of consumers that purchase items from the ‘Save the food’ section. In-store surveys were conducted at the point of selection with consumers that had picked foods from that section, and follow-up surveys were sent to them a week later, enquiring, among others, whether or not they had managed to consume the suboptimal food they had purchased.

According to the participants, 98% of them had managed to consume these products, and only 2% ended up discarding the suboptimal food that they had bought. It was found that consumers appear to purchase items from the ‘Save the food’ section primarily spontaneously and, for the most part, with the aim to save money. An in-depth examination of consumer characteristics revealed two clusters of consumers, based on how much they differ in attitudes towards the environment and food waste. The ‘Deal-seekers’ are highly attracted to deals, low prices and getting the most value for their money, and they have a lower concern for the environment. The ‘Conscious consumers’ are highly concerned about the environment and tend to state that they waste very little food, but are also fairly attracted to price deals.

These findings have implications for supermarkets. First, the high deal proneness of consumers making use of the ‘Save the food’ section encourages stores to keep offering these products at reduced prices. As a large proportion of these consumers is highly concerned with the environment, it is beneficial to clearly communicate the connection between avoiding food waste and doing good for the environment - maybe by adding the call-to-action “Save food, save the environment”.

Further information: <https://mgmt.au.dk/research/marketing/mapp/projects/wasteprom/>