



Getting more from your store

Ratings of 55 supermarkets, plus how to shop cheaper, smarter, faster

WHEN IT COMES to supermarkets, biggest isn't always best. Our survey of 27,208 readers reveals that Walmart, America's largest grocer, is at the bottom of the food chain. The megastore finished last among 55 supermarkets, earning subpar scores for checkout speed, employee courtesy, and meat and produce quality. Despite the knocks, Walmart's 3,300 supercenters—180,000-foot shopping stadiums that combine a gro-

cery, a mass-merchandise store, and sometimes a pharmacy—were the destination of choice for 28 percent of respondents, many of whom were drawn by low prices. But our survey found that you don't have to settle for limp produce, helpless help, and long checkout lines.

Fourteen of the top 20 chains even had prices on a par with Walmart's, readers told us. They include the national stores Costco (the no-frills warehouse club with large-sized goods), Trader Joe's (a limited-

assortment store featuring store brands and unconventional items such as Sardinian parchment crackers), and Whole Foods (focusing on perishables, organics, and service), as well as the regional chains Raley's (West Coast), Publix (South), Wegmans (East), and Fred Meyer (Pacific Northwest and Alaska). Respondents also lauded a Ratings newcomer, Sprouts Farmers Market (160 stores in eight Western states), which showcases fresh and whole-grain food.

Store choice matters because Americans

Shop cheaper

Your dollar will go especially far at Trader Joe's, Costco (with a \$55 annual fee), Market Basket (east Texas and Louisiana), Fareway Stores (Midwest), Stater Bros. (Southern California), WinCo (West), Aldi (mostly eastern half of the U.S.), ShopRite (Northeast), Save-A-Lot (nationwide), and Sam's Club (Walmart's nationwide warehouse club, with a \$45 annual fee). Those stores had the lowest prices, our readers said.

They ought to know. About three-quarters of respondents said they scan supermarket circulars for specials, take advantage of manufacturer coupons, and buy store brands. Here are the best ways to save:

▶ Compare unit prices

They're on shelf tags beneath the products and they're the only way to know for sure which package size is the best deal per quart, ounce, or sheet. Bigger is usually cheaper, but not always. At a local A&P, we spotted side-by-side packages of Hampton Farms peanuts, one 8 ounces, the other 24 ounces. The unit price tags revealed that the smaller bag cost \$2 per pound; the larger, \$2.66.

▶ Try store brands

They account for about a quarter of all supermarket products and sell for 22 percent less, on average, than national brands. Seventy-eight percent of respondents who bought store brands said they were just as good, and our own tests have shown that's often true. In any case, almost all chains back their brands with a money-back satisfaction guarantee. Sales remain strong even though the economy has improved. "They're not a passing fancy," says Susan Viamari, an editor for IRI, a market research company based in Chicago. But the price gap has narrowed slightly since 2010, Viamari



says, mostly because of a trend toward premium store-brand products.

▶ Consider warehouse clubs

They have everyday low prices, so you don't have to wait for a sale. But consider whether it makes sense for you to pay the membership fee and to buy in bulk—20 pounds of flour or 500 feet of aluminum foil, for example. Other drawbacks to club shopping: minimal service, a limited selection, and long checkout lines, according to our survey.

▶ Don't pay for convenience

Prepped and precut, diced, sliced, or chunked commodities from watermelon to garlic can cost extra. At a Price Chopper, portobello mushrooms were \$12.79 per pound sliced and \$4.99 per pound whole. But sometimes it works the other way; packaged products are cheaper. We saw russet baking potatoes for \$1.29 per pound sold individually but \$2.99 for a 5-pound sack.

▶ Capitalize on coupons

In 2013, consumers saved \$3.5 billion by using coupons for packaged goods. Manufacturers distributed more than 300 billion coupons that year but redeemed "only" 2.8 billion, according

to Charles K. Brown, vice president of marketing for NCH Marketing Services, a coupon-processing firm. Don't leave money on the table: Savings per purchase averaged \$1.62, Brown says. For all of the chatter about paperless coupons that are downloaded to smart phones, 91 percent of all coupons reached shoppers through newspaper inserts. Check the websites SmartSource.com and CoolSavings.com, too. But many coupons promote unhealthy foods. According to a recent study by the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 25 percent of online coupons observed were for processed snack foods, candies, and desserts. Less than 3 percent of coupons were for produce, and only 1 percent were for unprocessed meats.

▶ Shop early in the sales cycle

Eleven percent of readers complained about stores being out of advertised specials. The problem was worst at Pick 'n Save, Pathmark, Meijer, and Tops. We've had the best luck finding the type of bargains prominent in circulars at the beginning of the cycle (usually Friday or Saturday).

▶ Be loyal

Many chains reserve their best deals for customers who enroll in loyalty- or bonus-card programs. And some have a fuel-reward component; the typical discount is 10 cents a gallon at participating gas stations for each \$50 spent at the store. Other possible perks: rebates based on purchases (usually \$5 for every \$500), coupon doubling and buy-one-get-one-free specials, coupons toward future purchases, and the ability for those 60 and older to get extra savings on certain days. More than half of our survey respondents belonged to bonus-card programs, and 84 percent were satisfied with the savings.

are heavily invested in their supermarkets, averaging 88 trips per year and spending approximately \$6,000, according to the Food Marketing Institute, a trade group. But just because people shop a lot doesn't mean they enjoy it. Fifty-six percent of our survey respondents experienced at least one problem; 31 percent had two or more. Walmart was the worst offender: Eight in 10 shoppers there had at least one gripe, mostly that there weren't enough open checkout lanes, that aisles were congested,

or that basic items were out of stock. (See "Top Gripes About Grocery Shopping," on page 20.)

Retail rancor prompted one-third of readers to quit shopping at a nearby store in the past year, mostly because of high prices, but also because of long waits, inadequate selection, or poor-quality food. High prices were a more important reason for "firing" a store now than in the years immediately after the recession. In our current survey 58 percent of respon-

dents gave a store the boot because of prices, compared with 43 percent in 2011.

Consumers' readiness to seek less expensive supermarkets doesn't surprise Jim Hertel, a partner with Willard Bishop, retail consultants in Barrington, Ill., who cites high unemployment and prices that remain at or near all-time highs. "The Great Recession also spurred consumer trial of many extreme-value formats, like Aldi's limited-assortment stores," he says. "Many shoppers found them more



than acceptable. Taken together, consumers are still nervous, and they have more alternatives.”

For quick trips, shoppers have been turning to pharmacies, convenience stores, and dollar stores, which have added refrigerated and fresh items and broadened their assortment of packaged goods. To retain customers, the historically slow-to-change supermarket industry has had little choice but to up its game. Among the tactics: Enhanced preferred-shopper programs, nutrition-awareness counseling, additional organic offerings, take-home meals, and new technology to make shopping easier.

Dinner to go

Americans have been eating more meals at home since the recession, and supermarkets have begun offering serious competition to restaurants, says Bonnie Riggs, an industry analyst with the NPD Group, a market-research firm on Long Island, N.Y. They're filling the void with innovative dining options without “white-tablecloth” prices. Forget about rotisserie chicken and salad bars. Several Hy-Vees have a Market Grille, a restaurant with a full dinner menu. All items are made to order and served by trained wait staff. There's even patio dining during warmer months, and a Sunday brunch buffet. Wegmans has dining options ranging from casual to fancy, including market cafés, pubs, and an Italian restaurant and wine bar. Many Schnucks stores have wine experts certified by the Society of Wine Educators, and the Schnucks in Des Peres, Mo., has a beer cave with more than 500 craft brews. Some Whole Foods stores offer sit-down dining and “boutiques” with a wide range of food (sushi, seafood, tacos) and settings (a Paris café, a barbecue shack, a neighborhood diner).

The first step toward getting the most from your supermarket is to choose one that caters to your priorities, whether low prices, top-notch perishables, sparkling service, or high-quality store brands. The Ratings list many good options. The next step is to work the system so that you can shop cheaper, smarter, and faster.

HOW TO SAVE AT THE STORE

Use your smart phone to download the RedLaser or ShopSavvy app and scan the code for the video.



Shop smarter

Smart shopping begins with understanding how goods are priced and marketed, and how stores coax you into buying them. It also entails making healthy choices, which has become easier at many stores.

Learn about layout

Supermarkets are organized to slow you down so that you'll buy more. The average store contains 73 product displays to stop you in your tracks. Display items, particularly on “end caps” that frame each aisle, aren't always on sale; they might just be nearing their “use by” date.

Enter most stores and you come face to face with fruit and vegetables, which indicate a store's commitment to freshness, says Jim Hertel of Willard Bishop. The scent of baked rolls, often evident the moment you step inside, stirs hunger—and more buying. Freezer and refrigerated cases without doors encourage unplanned purchases. Coffee bars and piped-in music can make you linger and buy more (depending on the music, of course!). Need meat, milk, or other staples? They're usually in back

of the store. To get there, you'll often travel the store's perimeter, the site of especially profitable—and tempting—fresh goods.

Too many hurdles, of course, and you might be out the door fast. Fifteen percent of our survey respondents complained about congested aisles. The biggest offender was Market Basket, where 35 percent of shoppers said clutter was a problem.

Know the high-low game

Most stores lure customers with weekly specials on staples such as cereal, bacon, and detergent, then raise prices on other goods to offset those “loss leaders.” You're unlikely to find the specials for less anywhere else, even at warehouse clubs. If you follow the flyers, you'll see that staples go on sale at predictable intervals, so you can stock up and save. In our survey, 11 percent of stores were out of stock on an advertised special. If that happens to you, request a rain check.

Beware of tricky signs

If you see, say, 10 containers of yogurt for \$10, know that you're rarely required to buy all 10 to get the discount. You can buy one for \$1.



Check your receipt

Overall, just 5 percent of our respondents said they had been overcharged in the past year. But the error rate at Shaw's, a New England chain, was twice as high.

Report frequent pricing mistakes to the Federal Trade Commission (ftc.gov), your state attorney general, or your local consumer affairs office. Chains can be fined for repeated violations. The FTC recommends that retailers offer consumers a reward, such as giving them the item free if there's an overcharge. Many do just that, though they rarely volunteer the information. It's up to you to complain.

Weigh the benefits of organics

Sales of organic products reached \$31.5 billion in 2012, according to the Organic Trade Association. They cost more than their conventional counterparts, but it's worth buying the organic fruit and vegetables that can carry pesticide residue even after washing. Consumer Reports recommends buying organic apples, bell peppers, celery, cherries, imported grapes, nectarines, peaches, pears, potatoes, red raspberries, spinach, and strawberries.

Read nutrition labels

Shoppers tend to judge the healthfulness of products by the company they keep. Putting a creamy dip next to cut veggies, for instance, makes people feel less guilty about buying the dip. The truth is on the Nutrition Facts label. More chains are flagging healthier products with shelf tags based on Food and Drug Administration guidelines and advice from dietitians. Northeast chain Hannaford has a Guiding Stars program that assigns foods one to three stars (good, better, best) based on the amount of vitamins, minerals, fiber, and whole grains; the absence of fats and cholesterol; and added sodium and sugars. (Unrated products have less nutritional value per 100 calories.) Vons (in Southern California and Nevada) has a Simple Nutrition program; Giant (Washington, D.C., area) offers a Healthy Ideas program; and Publix (Southeast) has a Better Choice program.

Learn about staying well

Heather Garlich, a spokeswoman for the Food Marketing Institute, says that in the 1980s, just two supermarket chains had a registered dietitian on staff. Today, 85 percent have a dietitian at the corporate level who helps influence merchandising and marketing decisions. Thirty percent have in-store dietitians. More than half of chains provide nutrition counseling.



STORE BRAND



NAME BRAND FROM REGIONAL CHAIN

Where we saved

To compare prices, we made a grocery list and shopped for the items in various ways. We bought the same name-brand product for all but the store-brand category. (Store-brand and regional-chain prices are from Price Chopper, a mid-priced supermarket.) In each instance, we sought the best possible deal—choosing the most economical package size, using coupons, and swiping club cards. Package sizes differed, so we've listed cost based on unit prices.

Bottom line. Store brands and Costco vied for cheapest. Walmart.com came in third. Its shipping is free for orders of more than \$50 (\$4.97 for those less than \$50), with expedited service for as little as \$2.97. Walmart's online and in-store prices were largely the same. Walgreens, which lacks the product depth of even a small supermarket, was by far the priciest overall.

Product	Store brand	Costco	Walmart.com	Regional chain	Walgreens
Flour, lb.	\$0.36	\$0.48	\$0.49	\$0.60	\$0.70
Coffee, lb.	6.15	8.00	10.64	14.39	9.32
Ketchup, qt.	1.59	1.26	2.48	2.99	3.99
Laundry detergent, qt.	1.00	3.67	3.83	4.26	4.90
Tall kitchen bags, 100	13.11	8.99	16.55	10.83	25.76
Toilet paper, roll	0.62	0.65	0.73	0.85	1.00
Shampoo, pt.	3.80	3.00	4.80	4.44	5.70
Diapers, 100	12.00	19.22	17.97	18.98	23.98
Raisin bran, lb.	2.15	1.57	1.87	2.92	2.32
Cranberry juice, qt.	1.74	1.31	1.57	1.97	1.14
Ibuprofen, 100	4.40	4.61	6.48	7.50	12.98
Dish detergent, qt.	2.67	2.73	3.11	3.20	5.11
TOTAL	\$49.59	\$55.49	\$70.52	\$72.93	\$96.90

Shop faster

Love supermarket shopping? We thought not. Here's how to speed up your trip and make it more efficient:

Go mobile

Most chains have rolled out apps for iPhones and Android devices that let users create grocery lists, browse weekly circulars, view product photos, add manufacturers' coupons to an account, check off items placed in a virtual cart, scan bar codes of products at home so that they'll be added to your list, and get real-time prices. You can do many of those tasks online, too.

Shop online

More than half of consumers buy groceries online at least occasionally, according to the Food Marketing Institute's 2012 Food Trends. Yet food purchases account for less than 3 percent of all transactions, and online supermarket shopping has been slow to grow. "Everyone has had to develop a shop-at-home option to counter the Amazon effect," says Craig Rosenblum of industry consultant Willard Bishop. "But it's a struggle for most retailers to pacify that need. They're struggling to find the best model and the right amount to charge."

Amazon.com and Walmart.com sell packaged goods, and Amazon has a fledgling service, Amazon Fresh, selling perishable foods in several West Coast markets. Walmart is testing fresh-food sales in a few cities as part of its Walmart To Go program. Nationwide online supermarkets include Netgrocer.com; FreshDirect is among regional ones. Many grocery chains have their own programs. At Safeway, customers can order online or by smart phone, but they must buy at least \$49 in merchandise. Delivery (about \$10 for orders of more than



\$150; about \$13 for less) is scheduled at a prearranged time. Other chains let you order online, then pick up the packed goods at the store.

Try a meal to go

That won't save time in the store, but it will once you're home. More appealing fare plus consumers' desire for convenience, healthier options, and affordability help explain why shoppers bought 1.7 billion meals from food retailers in 2012. "It's like having a restaurant right in your kitchen," says chef Peter Dow of Harris Teeter in a video promoting the chain's Chef Prepared Dinner at Home lineup of ready-to-cook meals. Until now, Dow says, supermarket meals were of "average quality" and designed mainly for a long shelf life. Newer meals involve less processing and come in packaging that's more attractive and better at keeping food fresh.

Check yourself out

At least 60 percent of supermarkets have one or more self-checkout stations to let people

scan, bag, and pay for groceries without a cashier. Theoretically, they also let you skip long lines. Fifty-six percent of our survey respondents used self-checkout during the past year, and 67 percent of them said it saved time. But about one-quarter of users complained that the checkout didn't work properly or that slowpokes held them up. One in five had a tough time figuring out how to operate the scanner and couldn't find an employee to help.

Kroger and its affiliates (Fred Meyer, Fry's, and King Soopers, among many others) have another way to get customers out fast. They have installed infrared cameras above entrances, exits, and checkouts that measure the heat radiated by shoppers' bodies. Higher heat means more customers. Information from the cameras is fed into a database that lets a manager know the number of checkouts that need to be open.

The cameras have reduced average customer waiting time to 26 seconds, Kroger claims. Before they were installed, the typical wait was 4 minutes.

Top gripes about grocery shopping

Fifty-six percent of survey respondents had at least one complaint about their supermarket. Walmart Supercenter drew an especially high percentage of critics; Publix, in the South; Sprouts Natural Market, in the West; and Wegmans, in the East, had the lowest.

TOO FEW OPEN CHECKOUTS

Average (all chains)

19%

Among the worst
Walmart

How many complained

53%

CONGESTED AISLES

Average (all chains)

14%

Among the worst
Market Basket

How many complained

35%

OUT-OF-STOCK ADVERTISED SPECIALS

Average (all chains)

13%

Among the worst
Pick 'n Save

How many complained

32%

LACK OF CHOICE

Average (all chains)

8%

Among the worst
Save-A-Lot

How many complained

27%



Ratings Supermarkets

In order of reader score.

Better ← → Worse
● ◐ ◑ ◐ ◑

Store	Reader score	Survey results			
		Service	Perishables	Prices	Cleanliness
Wegmans	88	●	●	◐	●
Trader Joe's	87	●	◐	◐	●
Publix	85	●	●	◐	●
Costco	84	◐	●	●	◐
Sprouts Farmers Market	84	◐	●	◐	◐
Market Basket	83	●	●	●	◐
Raley's	83	●	●	◐	●
Fareway Stores	83	●	◐	●	◐
Stater Bros.	82	◐	◐	●	◐
WinCo	81	◐	◐	◐	◐
Aldi	81	◐	◐	●	◐
Hy-Vee	81	◐	◐	◐	●
Harris-Teeter	81	◐	◐	◐	●
H-E-B	81	◐	◐	●	◐
Whole Foods Market	80	◐	●	●	●
Hannaford	80	◐	◐	◐	◐
Fry's	80	◐	◐	◐	◐
Fred Meyer	80	◐	◐	◐	◐
King Soopers	79	◐	◐	◐	◐
Meijer	79	◐	◐	◐	◐
Smith's Food & Drug	79	◐	◐	◐	◐
Schnucks	78	◐	◐	◐	◐
Ingles	78	◐	◐	◐	◐
ShopRite	78	◐	◐	●	◐
Kroger	77	◐	◐	◐	◐
Target/SuperTarget	77	◐	◐	◐	◐
Save Mart	77	◐	◐	◐	◐

Store	Reader score	Survey results			
		Service	Perishables	Prices	Cleanliness
Save-A-Lot	77	◐	◐	●	◐
Giant (NJ, NY, OH, PA, WV)	77	◐	◐	◐	◐
Big Y	77	◐	◐	◐	◐
Piggly Wiggly	76	◐	◐	◐	◐
Bi-Lo (GA, NC, SC, TN)	76	◐	●	◐	◐
Weis	76	◐	◐	◐	◐
IGA	76	◐	◐	◐	◐
Sam's Club	76	◐	◐	●	◐
Ralphs	76	◐	◐	◐	◐
BJ's Wholesale Club	75	◐	◐	◐	◐
County Market	75	◐	◐	◐	◐
Albertsons	75	◐	◐	◐	◐
Cub Foods	75	◐	◐	◐	◐
Giant (DC, DE, MD, VA)	74	◐	◐	◐	◐
Winn-Dixie	74	◐	◐	◐	◐
Giant Eagle	73	◐	◐	●	◐
Vons	73	◐	◐	◐	◐
Price Chopper	73	◐	◐	◐	◐
Safeway	73	◐	◐	◐	◐
Food Lion	73	◐	◐	◐	◐
Stop & Shop	72	◐	◐	◐	◐
Jewel-Osco	72	◐	◐	●	◐
Tops Markets	72	◐	◐	◐	◐
Pick 'n Save	72	◐	◐	◐	◐
Acme	70	◐	◐	●	◐
Pathmark	70	◐	◐	◐	◐
Shaw's	69	◐	◐	◐	◐
Walmart Supercenter	67	◐	◐	◐	◐

Guide to the Ratings

Ratings are based on 27,208 responses to a survey conducted by Consumer Reports National Research Center. Respondents told us about their experiences at one or two stores between January 2012 and June 2013. The survey reflects 48,076 visits to supermarkets, supercenters, warehouse clubs, and limited-assortment stores. The findings represent the experiences of our readers, not necessarily those of the general population. **Reader score** measures overall satisfaction with the shopping experience and isn't limited to the criteria listed in the table. A score of 100 would mean all respondents were completely satisfied, 80 would mean very satisfied, on average; 60, fairly well satisfied. Differences of fewer than 5 points are not meaningful. Scores for **service** (a combination of employee courtesy and checkout speed), **perishables** (the quality of meat and produce), **price**, and **cleanliness** are relative and reflect averages on a scale from Completely Satisfied to Completely Dissatisfied.



SCANNER OVERCHARGES

Average (all chains)

6%

Among the worst
Shaw's

How many complained

13%

OUT-OF-STOCK BASIC ITEMS

Average (all chains)

6%

Among the worst
Walmart

How many complained

27%

SPOTTY PRICE LABELING

Average (all chains)

6%

Among the worst
Walmart

How many complained

14%

CONFUSING LAYOUT

Average (all chains)

6%

Among the worst
Schnucks

How many complained

12%