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Peter Stanczak
College of DuPage

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Manipulative Tactics in Supermarkets and Personal Responsibility of the Customer

by Peter Stanczak

(English 1102)

We all try to eat as healthy as we can and even when food is readily obtainable, what we eat is not always our choice. We simply eat the food products available to us or what we can buy in our local stores. This essay will try to evaluate what is available to us in local stores and how supermarkets present food products to their customers. Not many people realize how much effort is made by food manufactures and supermarkets to attract us, potential buyers, to certain types of items, and how utilization of the premium spaces in a supermarket affects our food choices, which potentially can lead to obesity in America.

According to Nestle in the essay “The Supermarket: Prime Real Estate,” supermarkets spend tremendous amount of time and effort to organize products they sell. Nestle claims that supermarkets are deceiving people by supposedly offering choice of food to the buyer. However, in reality, the choice of food they sell belongs to the store, as they really are in the business to make profit. As she explains, “Supermarkets are not social services agencies providing food for the hungry” (Nestle 497). She discusses how a great deal of planning and strategic product placement is being implemented to maximize the profit margins. She is also letting readers know that food corporations are hiring social scientists to study human emotions, so that the findings could be used later against them by manipulating them to buy specific products.

So, we can ask the question, is the food we are eating completely our choice or do we simply eat what is proposed to us? The more I read Nestle’s essay, the more I was convinced that our choices of food are completely manipulated by the supermarket tactics. For example, “There are precise reasons why milk is at the back of the store and the center aisles are so long” (497). Because of this arrangement we are forced to look at countless items in between; this action is totally intentional on behalf of the stores in order to expose us to the products they try to promote. I can totally relate to this tactic. Often, when I shop for groceries I find myself wandering in the aisles and picking up some items on impulse or due to visual attraction or appeal of the product. If the layout of the store allowed me to take an alternative route and avoid this massive display of products, I would probably not buy any extra items, I would only buy the items I originally came for. So it is not so hard to imagine how the long aisles in stores help promote products the supermarkets are trying to sell, and how easy it is for an average customer to reach for these additional items, such as a delicious soda or tasty cookies. Because of this aisle layout, it is not so hard to imagine many customers buy these additional items, which lead to overeating and are leading many people to obesity in America.

On more than one occasion when shopping in a supermarket, I did have a chance to observe how manipulative tactics of the stores are working. For example, a small candy, gum or colorful chocolate bars are position in close parameter of a cashier. This positioning works well since we can’t miss these items and it is especially effective on children. The product is so close to the customer that many times children are capable of grabbing small candy or gummy bears, then nag the parents to buy them. Most of the time parents buy these sweet products, rarely I witness the product to be returned back on shelf.

Product packaging also has a huge impact on what we buy and how much of a particular item we take home. We all know, or we can say we were professionally trained by the supermarket, that the individual items are more expensive as opposed to buying in bulk. Therefore, as a result we have tendencies to over-purchase some items because they are simply cheaper. Once again we can make

the conclusion that this habit of buying in bulk is leading to an excess of food at home. This may lead to consuming more because we have more and it is readily available.

This brings us to personal responsibility, as Nestle states, “At the supermarket, you exercise freedom of choice and personal responsibility every time you put an item in your shopping cart” (498). We have to recognize the fact that massive efforts are being made to influence our decisions and steer us to buy products which make more profits for the supermarket. We have to learn how to be selective and educate ourselves about the tactics supermarkets use to target their customers. Ultimately, the choice of what we buy in a supermarket and what we eat is ours. In the essay, “What You Eat Is Your Business,” Radley Balko raises awareness about government and various agencies being too involved in our private lives. He argues that what individual citizens are eating is their business and should stay that way. Balko also argues that people should personally take responsibility for their weight gain problems. He is claiming that our government is implementing wrong policies and is jumping too quickly to create restrictive regulations. Balko says that regulating the public on what they are eating or what is being sold in schools is not the way to fight obesity.

Instead, Balko suggests a promotion of individual responsibility and ownership of our own well-being (467). If a person likes to eat unhealthy food no government agency or restrictive law are capable of protecting him from gaining weight. From personal experience, when I gain weight the only way I lose it is with combination of serious diet restriction and a heavy exercise routine. I pay close attention to what I eating and try to balance my calorie intake by preparing and cooking almost all of my meals. I eliminate high-calorie drinks like soda as well as minimize my sugar intake and fatty meats. At one time I even tried a strictly vegetarian diet for six months. From my own experience, I can say that taking personal responsibility in our well-being plays a crucial role in keeping us healthy. Balko is raising interesting question: “what incentive is there for me to put down the cheeseburger?” when “the government is paying for...medication” (467). In that moment he argues that when someone else is paying for another person’s medicine we lose incentive to stay healthy and that the burden of the cost of our medicine is shared collectively. Balko is promoting traditional America values, where he is advocating for bringing back individual responsibility in our well-being. He wants to reward people for healthy lifestyles and penalize people for bad choices, especially when they lead to obesity. He also comes up with some clever idea that we should be able to allocate our saved money from our health care accounts to our retirement accounts, in order to promote healthy lifestyle.

In conclusion, both Nestle and Balko, are stressing the idea of personal responsibility when comes to food and our dietary habits. They both advocate for caution and self-control when we make our nutritional decisions. Both essays, “The Supermarket: Prime Real Estate” and “What You Eat I Your Business,” are good sources of information where we can educate ourselves as customer how to behave when we chose our foods. Furthermore how we can change and train our minds to be vigilant, and take personal responsibility and control over our own nutritional choices. We can learn from Nestle how to avoid sophisticated manipulation and tactics implemented in supermarkets, which in many cases are leading customers to buy wrong foods and eventually my lead them to obesity. Nestle and Balko, equally, bring awareness to the public that personal responsibly is really important and we should pay close attention to what food we choose, because so much effort is taken to influence our behaviors. The lack of understanding that we are being manipulated can cause us to pay a great price and my lead us to buyingand consuming highly marketed products, which often bring high revenues to the supermarkets but do not possess high nutritional values. It is because of these behaviors we are in danger of paying the ultimate price, not only with our wallets, but primarily with our health.

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