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6 Meal-Planning Hacks That Can Recalibrate Your Grocery Budget

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By Barbara Brody

This post originally appeared on [LearnVest](#).

Are you routinely bowled over by your grocery bill? Do you often find yourself tossing a garbage bag's worth of spoiled ingredients? Are you on a first-name basis with the pizza delivery guy?

All of these could be signs that your food-shopping—and meal-planning—habits could probably use an overhaul.

Since we're always on the prowl for ways to cut back on waste—both the food and money variety—we asked Jess Dang, founder of the popular meal-planning service [Cook Smarts](#), to share her top tips for hitting the supermarket with a far better (read: non-budget-busting) meal-planning mind-set.

Meal-Planning Hack #1: Shop Your Kitchen

You heard right. Before you even set foot in the supermarket, you should do a thorough inventory of your freezer and pantry.



“It’s easy to forget that you bought two pounds of chicken breast when it was on sale,” Dang says. And depending on what you find, you may need to pick up only a few fresh ingredients to make a tasty meal.

Stymied by what exactly to make with that value pack of frozen fish filets or that bottle of chimichurri sauce that seemed like such a good idea at the time? No problem—you can search for recipes that center on specific ingredients at yummly.com/recipes.

Meal-Planning Hack #2: Stock Up on Inexpensive Staples

You’ll never go hungry—or be “forced” to order takeout—if you always keep these four low-cost yet highly versatile ingredients on hand:

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Beans: Not only are they a great source of protein, but you can use them in a variety of dishes, including salads, soups and chili.

Grains: Dang recommends buying quinoa, barley and brown rice in the bulk aisle for extra savings.

Frozen veggies: Contrary to what you might think, freezing vegetables retains their nutritional value—and you can use them to make a bevy of meals, from pasta dishes to tacos.

Diced tomatoes: “You can combine them with frozen veggies and beans for a soup, sauté them with onions, or purée them for a homemade pasta sauce,” Dang says.

Meal-Planning Hack #3: Forgo the Fancy Stuff

Skip the pricey Himalayan salt and black truffle oil. Trendy ingredients might seem like they’re worth splurging on, but unless you’re a real foodie, says Dang, you’ll probably never use them. Her advice: You’re better off using that money to invest in some quality cookware, like a cast-iron skillet.

RELATED: [7 Trendy Super Foods: Are They Worth the Extra Money?](#)

Meal-Planning Hack #4: Map Out Several Dishes at Once

If you want to make a recipe that calls for half a head of cabbage, for example, select a second recipe that incorporates cabbage, so you can use up the rest of it.

Dang is also a fan of planning for leftovers. “You might cook two pounds of salmon on Monday, serve half of it for dinner that night, and then use the rest in a salmon, spinach and quinoa salad on Tuesday,” she says. The goal is to cook once but eat twice, saving both time and money—especially if you buy your protein in larger “family” packages.

Meal-Planning Hack #5: Stick to Your List

Shopping for groceries without a list practically guarantees that you'll buy a lot of unnecessary extras and rack up a bigger bill.

A little advance planning also helps you avoid wasting food later. "You might know that Brussels sprouts are good for you, but they're going to end up spoiling in your refrigerator unless you figure out which ingredients go with them before going to the store," says Dang, who points out that Americans throw away a whopping 40% of the food they buy.

Meal-Planning Hack #6: Don't Be Seduced by Sales

Remember that nothing-special sweater you couldn't resist buying because it was so marked down? Chances are it's still sitting in the back of your closet—unworn. The same thing can happen to food you're not excited about eating.

Dang says shoppers often go over budget because they get tempted by two-for-one offers or select the jumbo container of something because they think it's a better value.

Her suggestion? "Ask yourself: Am I really going to use all of this, or am I just buying it because it's on sale?" says Dang. If the full-price item wouldn't make it into your cart, the "bargain" one probably shouldn't, either.

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How Grocery Bags Manipulate Your Mind

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Bringing your own shopping bags to the grocery store increases your tendency to buy indulgent items—but also to treat yourself to ice cream and cookies, according to new research by Uma R. Karmarkar and Bryan Bollinger.

BYOB: HOW BRINGING YOUR OWN SHOPPING BAGS LEADS TO TREATING YOURSELF, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

There's a classic cartoon plot device that represents a struggle with temptation. A tiny angel pops up on the conflicted character's left shoulder, urging him to follow the path of righteousness. A tiny devil sits on his right shoulder, pressing him to give into his desires.

In real life, it turns out that an everyday item has the power to act as both angel and devil every time we go to the grocery store. It lurks in car trunks and pantries all over the world, waiting to guide us simultaneously down paths of virtue and vice. What is this surprising Svengali?

It's a reusable shopping bag.

New experimental research shows that shoppers are more likely to buy virtuous organic items when they bring their own reusable bags to the store than when they opt for paper or plastic bags at the checkout counter. At the same time, those who bring their own bags are more likely to buy indulgent items like ice cream and cookies. Moreover, consumers tend to place a higher value on both organic products and decadent treats when they bring their own bags than when they don't.

Researchers Uma R. Karmarkar and Bryan Bollinger report their preliminary findings in their working paper [BYOB: How Bringing Your Own Shopping Bags Leads to Treating Yourself, and the Environment](#). (The collaborative effort addresses each of their particular interests. Karmarkar, an assistant professor and neuroscientist in the Marketing unit at [Harvard Business School](#), studies factors that affect consumer choice. Bollinger, an assistant professor at NYU's Stern [School of Business](#), studies the marketing of sustainable products.)

"There are all these little things that we're supposed to do to be better to the environment, like turning off the lights when we leave the room or recycling our bottles," Karmarkar says. "Bringing bags is interesting in that it's a difficult thing to remember to do, and actually requires a fairly big behavioral change on the part of the consumer. Our question was, when you succeed at this big behavioral change, does it change other elements of what you're doing as well?"

A SERIES OF EXPERIMENTS

As their working paper explains, the researchers combined empirical and experimental methods to test the purchasing effect of reusable bags.

Looking at loyalty card data from a large grocery chain in California, Karmarkar and Bollinger tracked and analyzed 936,232 purchases by 5,987 households across two years. To assess organic purchases, they looked for transactions in which the consumer could choose either an organic or a nonorganic option—a carton of milk, for example. In monitoring what they called "indulgent" purchases, the researchers looked at sugary items like ice cream and candy bars, as well as salty treats like potato chips.

The data showed a definite correlation: Shoppers who had brought their own bags bought decidedly more indulgences and chose more organic products than those who didn't. But this wasn't necessarily enough information to establish causality—that is, that both effects were specifically due to bringing their own bags. "There are a lot of things going on in a store and a lot of inputs," Karmarkar says.

So she and Bollinger dug deeper with a series of experiments, enlisting participants for a number of online surveys.

In the first experiment, the researchers assigned participants to one of two conditions. The "with bags" participants were asked to imagine approaching a supermarket to do their grocery shopping with their own bags. The "without bags" group received nearly identical instructions, but nothing about bags was mentioned. All the participants looked at a floor map of the grocery store and listed 10 items they would most likely purchase on their hypothetical outing.

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Regarding indulgent items, the results depended on whether the participants had children in their households. For those with dependents, there was no significant difference between the with-bags and the without-bags condition. For those without children, the with-bags participants were more likely to imagine buying ice cream and potato chips than the -without-bags- participants.

But the results couldn't speak to organic items; while participants listed items such as milk and vegetables, they generally didn't list whether their hypothetical choices were *organic* milk and vegetables.

"We could support some of the story but not all of it yet," Karmarkar says.

And so she and Bollinger conducted a second experiment, in which participants reported how much they'd be willing to pay for each of nine *specific* products. These included both organic and indulgent items, as well as "baseline" items like canned soup. Again, the participants were divided into hypothetical conditions of "with bags" and "without bags."

Consistent with the empirical data, the idea of bringing their own bags increased the likelihood that participants would buy both indulgent and organic items. Moreover, it increased the amount of money they'd be willing to pay for those items.

But the researchers had another question: Does it matter whether a reusable bag is the consumer's choice? "We wanted to examine whether it was important that you made the decision to bring the bags as opposed to a store policy that requires it," says Karmarkar, noting that some stores obligate customers to bring their own bags; others charge customers a fee for single-use carryout bags per a local government mandate.

In the next experiment, all the participants imagined bringing their own bags to the hypothetical grocery store. But while some were told to imagine bringing reusable bags of their own volition, others imagined that they had to bring bags due to a store policy.

Participants then rated their willingness to purchase organic, indulgent, and baseline items. In this case, the results showed no significant difference between the two groups with regard to organic items, which rated highly across the board. However, participants were more likely to buy indulgent foods if they imagined that bringing bags was their own choice.

"A simple way I think about those results is that if you do something good, you reward yourself," Karmarkar says. "You did something good for the environment, so you can have a cookie."

IMPLICATIONS

For retailers, the results suggest that store managers should reconsider where they display their organic items. In short, it may make sense to locate the kale near the Kit Kats.

"The research implies that the area near the checkout counter is a good place to display organic or environmentally positive items," Karmarkar says. "That's the place where shoppers' attention is probably going to be most focused on this element, the bag, which seems to encourage them to buy these things."

For consumers, she recommends that they just think about the findings as they stroll down the grocery store aisles.

"I'm of the mindset that it's useful to know the kinds of things that influence your own behavior," Karmarkar says. "If you're trying to maintain a strict diet, maybe you can recognize the bag's influence, and consciously fill the desire to treat yourself in another way that doesn't interfere with your goals. Maybe you can treat yourself to an extra half hour of sleep."

About the author

Carmen Nobel is senior editor of *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*.

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