

Theme: Consumers & Producers

GROCERY SHOPPING: WHY TAKE A LIST TO THE SUPERMARKET?

Work In Progress

Art Thomas and Ron Garland
.Massey University

Address for all correspondence:

Dr Art Thomas
Senior Lecturer in Marketing
Department of Marketing
Massey University
Private Bag 11222
Palmerston North
New Zealand

Phone: +64 6 350 5593
Fax: +64 6 350 2260

GROCERY SHOPPING: WHY TAKE A LIST TO THE SUPERMARKET?

Work In Progress

ABSTRACT

This work-in-progress draws upon script theory to examine the underlying reasons for use and non use of grocery shopping lists on the major weekly or two-weekly trip to the supermarket. Set in Palmerston North, New Zealand, the study examines several objectives about the shopping list being a moderator in purchase behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

Shopping Lists

Few published studies on the use of written shopping lists for grocery shopping trips are found in the marketing literature. Research by Thomas and Garland (1993) detailed studies of relevance. Shopping list usage reported in these studies ranges from 22% to 75%. Our work in Palmerston North, New Zealand, during the 1990s has yielded a very stable range between 61% to 67%.

Scripted Behaviour

Routine repetitive events in consumer behaviour can be referenced as scripted behaviour. A script is an organised memory structure that describes an appropriate sequence of activities to fit a specific situation (Leigh and McGraw, 1989). These authors, along with Iyer and Ahlawat (1986) and Lakshmi-Ratan and Iyer (1988) comment how scripts help dictate behaviour in familiar surroundings.

Typically then, given the routine and repetitive nature of grocery shopping, patterned and scripted behaviour occurs for all grocery shoppers. In the context of the literature, grocery shopping scripts represent learned ritualized processes equally applicable to those carrying or not carrying a shopping list. Indeed, it could be argued that *list shopping scripts* and *non list shopping scripts* exist, as might lifestyle scripts, financial savings scripts, opportunistic shopping scripts and deal-prone scripts. Through our development and learning, a multitude of scripts can be called upon as and when necessary from our cognitive structure.

Planning Divergence

The marketing literature has established that a written shopping list is an expression of scripted behaviour. However, as noted above, it is argued that both list and non list grocery shoppers operate on scripted behaviour. Whilst this may be the case, it seems too simplistic to claim that the presence of a written shopping list is what differentiates between these two types of grocery shoppers. Further, it may also be too simplistic to suggest that those possessing a shopping list are the only grocery shoppers who undertake planning for the trip to the supermarket. The written shopping list is unlikely to include all purchases made in-store. Rather, the written list merely provides some physical evidence of intended purchases. Thomas and Garland (1996) reported that 93% of grocery shoppers with written lists bought more items than were listed, suggesting some amount of unexplained 'over purchasing'. However, grocery shoppers, regardless of the presence of a shopping list, can not be certain about product availability (eg, products out-of-stock) until after they enter their supermarket and commence their shopping. Flexibility and shopper discretion are likely to be present on any trip, though we need to recognise that carrying a written grocery shopping list

does reduce shoppers' average expenditure on major trips (Thomas and Garland, 1993). Abratt and Goodey (1990) in their study of 450 consumers across 15 major supermarkets in South Africa found that the presence of a shopping list had a 'moderating' effect on 'unplanned' purchases. List shoppers claimed 16% of their supermarket purchases were 'unplanned', whilst for the non list shoppers, the 'unplanned' proportion of their total purchases was 25%. Putrevu and Ratchford (1997) in their model of search behaviour for grocery shopping derived an 'efficiency' measure which they defined as the amount of planning and organisation prior to the shopping trip. Individual components of 'efficiency' were preparing a list, pre sorting coupons, having a memorised 'list' and reviewing the specials on offer. Not unexpectedly, efficiency was positively related to consumer perception of the benefits derived from supermarket shopping - the more planning (efficiency), the more benefits.

It was the above findings and the earlier work by Knox and Chernatony (1990) (who claimed consumers' 'unplanned' purchases were departures from their scripts) that prompted us to contemplate the broad research questions: why do some shoppers take a list to the supermarket whilst others do not? What implications does the presence or absence of a written shopping list have for consumers and supermarkets alike?

Our paper's theoretical contribution is towards increasing the understanding about the underlying parameters of scripted behaviour amongst list and non list shoppers. Its "applied" contribution is in helping retailers (and supermarket retailers in particular) identify the possible impact that these two broad, shopper segments have on stock turnover.

OBJECTIVES

With a written shopping list being tangible evidence of both planning and scripted behaviour, the overall purpose of this study was to explore the underlying motives for the presence or absence of a list on the major grocery shopping trip to the supermarket. Specifically, objectives included:

- to ascertain if different characteristics or shopper demographics exist between list and non list shoppers;
- to determine the purpose being served by the presence or absence of a grocery shopping list;
- to ascertain the level of planning that may exist amongst non list shoppers, and the contribution this makes to total grocery shopping planning; and,

- to assess the extent of multiple supermarket usage by list and non list shoppers as well as their variation in expenditure across several supermarkets.

METHODOLOGY

The research reported here is derived from information collected on the 1998 Palmerston North Household Omnibus Survey (April), an annual face-to-face survey carried out by third-year marketing students as part of their course requirements. Survey coverage is the Palmerston North urban area (approximately 24,000 households). Equal numbers of males and females aged 15

years and over are interviewed in their homes. The standard market research procedure of three attempts at interview before substitution is used. In all, 183 grocery shoppers were interviewed of whom 67% (n=122) claimed to have used a written grocery shopping list on their last major trip to the supermarket.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

List and Non List Usage

Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they used a shopping list on their last major grocery shopping trip. In keeping with past measurements, the 1998 Omnibus survey (see Methodology for description) showed that 67% of those respondents who had anything to do with grocery shopping (directly responsible or shared the responsibility) took a shopping list with them on their last major shopping trip.

List and non list usage was checked against several demographic and socio-economic variables, for example gender, age, education, employment, household income and 'life cycle' - the latter measured in terms of the presence or absence of children of different ages in the household. Of these variables, gender (Chi-Sq=2.95,df=1,p=.09) and 'life-cycle' (Chi-Sq=9.82,df=3,p=.02) were the only ones of any importance, though age of respondent does show a leaning towards significance (Chi-Sq=5.32,df=3,p=.15).

The involvement of gender and 'life-cycle' is in keeping with previous results (Thomas and Garland, 1993). However, in terms of the current information, females (71%) more so than males (59%) are likely to be shopping list carriers. Further, 44% of non list users are singles or childless couples, with a further 16% added by 'empty nesters'; that is, youngest child over 15 years and not living at home. Thus, 61% of non list shoppers are made up of households without children. This figure is supported somewhat by the fact that the higher levels of non list usage are amongst 15-24 year olds (42%) and 40-60 year olds (44%).

Reasons for List Usage

Those respondents who took a written shopping list on their last shopping trip were asked an open ended question as to their reasons for their behaviour. Responses were content analysed in order to develop common themes or categories suitable for later quantitative analysis. Five user categories were developed and these follow.

User categories included:

- ensure we get requirements (planned intentions), ‘pantry stocking ‘ reminder;
- dictates how we shop, controls the process (fuss, conflict, habit, dependency);
- controls expenditure;
- specials over and above list - can consider easily - ‘extras’ over pantry requirements; and,
- other.

It is important to note from these categories that shopping lists not only ‘plan’ all grocery item purchases to varying degrees, but also act in a different capacity for their holders and fulfill a number of roles. For example, a list can be a dictator, a memory jogger, a controller of expenditure or even allow the acquisition of products over and above the listed items. This includes essential items, extra categories and treats.

Whilst habit or even personal circumstance can underlie the presence of a grocery shopping list, it seems evident to the researchers, given the multiple roles that lists fulfill, that they might easily be cast as lying at some point on a continuum defined at respective poles as ‘flexible’ and ‘rigid’. This suggested continuum is shown as Figure 1.

Figure 1. Shopping Planning Using Lists

Partial List (Flexible)			Full List (Rigid)		
Treat	Essentials but deviate	Memory jogger	Control action	Essentials	Control \$s, Dictate

Viewing the shopping list as something more than a rigid ‘dictator’ of purchase widens the perspective. In this respect, the variability of roles played by lists could go some way to explaining why so many shoppers in fact do not always accurately shop to their grocery shopping list. Previous research by Thomas and Garland (1996) shows some variability in the number of items **in excess** of those on the written list. Recognising this variability, and considering the above continuum, Figure 1 also goes some way to debunking the myth that if something is not on the list and subsequently finds itself in the shopper’s trolley, then it must be an *impulse or some other unplanned purchase*.

A reflection of variability is exhibited by some examples of respondent verbatims:

‘Couldn’t shop if I didn’t have a list’;
‘I follow a list and always make a list’;
‘I always add to it, but at least I start with something’;
‘It’s a guide to remember important items’;
‘Certain amount of money to spend and don’t want to go over it’; and,
‘If I don’t, then I don’t get half the things I need.

The quantitative results for taking a list to the supermarket are unlikely to surprise readers, but they do consolidate the foregoing discussion. Results are portrayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Reasons for taking a list to the supermarket

	List Shoppers	Age				Children in Household				Chi-Square	Df	p
		15-24 (22)	25-39 (36)	40-60 (22)	61+ (41)	None (41)	<5 (37)	<15 (5)	>15 (39)			
	(122)											
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%			
Ensure requirements	91*	91	92	100	85	92	86	100	92			
Controls process	30	27	28	9	44	29	27	20	33	6.80	3	0.08
Controls expenditure	25	27	22	36	22	17	35	60	21	7.08	3	0.08
Extras	7	5	3	9	12	7	5	-	10			
Other	4	9	3	-	5	7	-	-	5			

* Note this is multiple response data and percentages add to more than 100%.

That the list '*ensures you obtain the items that you need*' is predictable and almost all list shoppers offer this reason for their list bearing behaviour. This reason is universally the most frequently mentioned by all types of shoppers and varies little from its 91% incidence for everyone.

Next in importance comes '*controls the process of shopping*' (30%) and '*controls expenditure*' (25%) which are not statistically different from one another in incidence; that is, due to sampling error they could be the same value. The sentiments expressed here are the issues of control over how shoppers approach the task of grocery shopping, the routes they take through the supermarket, their way of imposing some cap or control over expenditure, etc. Older shoppers were rather more likely to offer '*controls the process*' as a reason for having a list (statistically significant at 92% confidence level), whilst the list being used for '*controlling expenditure*' was favoured by households with children, especially where the youngest child is aged 5-14 years (statistically significant at 92% confidence level).

These findings show how the written shopping list plays the various roles discussed above. It is first and foremost a prompter for buying essentials, but its role as only a guide should not be overlooked. However, nor should its moderating influences be discounted either - 34% of our list sample used the list to either control the shopping process or help curb expenditure. Previously we had argued the moderating influences of the written grocery shopping list on the major trip to the supermarket without substantiation, but now we can be unequivocal about the authenticity of this claim.

Reasons for Non List Usage

As indicated above, the same content analysis process aided the development of a list of seven categories; namely:

- list committed to memory, know what I want, few items to buy;
- use store offering to prompt;
- if I forget I go back, no hassle to return;
- choose on the basis of specials;
- can't be bothered, not organised, enough time not to worry;
- no budget constraints; and,
- I don't stick to a list.

Whilst it could be argued that list shoppers show a certain dependency for documenting their grocery requirements, non list shoppers do not appear to have the notion of 'control' in their 'vocabulary'. These underlying sentiments seem evident in the verbatims offered by respondents, some examples of which follow:

'Lists are a hassle to put together';
'I choose on the basis of specials';
'I've been married for a long time, I know the family's needs';
'If I forget I'll go back';
'I don't have to be organised';
'Decide what you're going to buy beforehand';
'Know precisely what to purchase'; and,
'If something is wanted or needed, I make sure I get it'.

Results for non list shoppers are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Reasons for not taking a list to the supermarket

	Non list Shoppers	Age				Chi-Square	Df	p
		15-24 (16)	25-39 (14)	40-60 (17)	61+ (14)			
	(61)							
	%	%	%	%	%			
List in memory	70*	50	64	94	71			
Use store offering	28	50	29	6	29	5.00	3	0.10
No hassle to return	2	6	-	-	-			
Choose specials	7	6	7	12	-			
Can't be bothered	20	31	14	18	14			
No budget constraint	3	-	-	6	7			
Lists don't work	7	44	7	-	14			

***Note this is multiple response data and percentages add to more than 100%.**

Non list grocery shoppers seemingly are less predictable in the reasons underlying their grocery shopping behaviour than their list bearing counterparts. Having a *'list committed to memory'* or *'knowing what is wanted'* (a contributing element to the category) though dominant (70%), by no means addresses all the reasons given. However, as a reason, it is highly suggestive of a considerable level of pre planning prior to store entry - a factor which is quite surprising.

By contrast, those who *'use the store offering'* (28%) - especially prevalent among young shoppers (statistically significant at the 90% confidence level), and to a lesser extent, those who *'can't be bothered'* writing a list (20%) - seemingly are less constrained in their behaviours. In fact, with the exception of *'list committed to memory'*, the remaining reasons all appear to have a *'free to choose'* air about them, though it could be argued that *'choose on the basis of specials'* may have some degree of pre planning; that is, a person visiting a store on the

basis of knowing or having read advertisements about that stores' specials. This notion seems to accommodate those shoppers' scripts that cater for the inclusion of specials.

While lack of constraints may be an explanation underlying reasons for not taking a list shopping, a simple ANOVA test involving the seven reasons and respondents' mean age showed significant results ($F=2.66$; $p=0.03$); that is, the mean age for each of the seven reasons exhibits variability. Based on the results, it would appear that '*no hassle to return*', '*choose specials*' and '*can't be bothered*' have a youthful orientation about them (mean age is about 26 years), while '*list in memory*' and '*use store offering*' are slightly more advanced in age (mean age is about 41 years, which matches that of the non list sample). On an age time line, the older or more senior shoppers (mean age about 63 years) represent a further grouping and accommodate the remaining reasons, '*no budget constraint*' and '*lists don't work*'. Without labouring the point too much, there is a suggestion that age is a differentiating variable in reasons for not using a shopping list. However, given the small sample sizes involved, further investigations involving larger samples would be advisable.

If one is to accept the premise that a high degree of planning exists amongst non list shoppers (70% claim '*list committed to memory*'), then a closer look at respondent statements underlying this is required. Contributing to this category are statements such as:

'Decide what you're going to buy before shopping';
'Take a quick check and memorise it';
'Know the family's needs';
'Know what I got, know what's wanted'; and,
'Know what's in the house and usually buy same things each week'.

If we can accept that a considerable amount of planning occurs amongst those not carrying a list, then this has the potential to impact heavily on current thinking. Presently about two thirds of grocery shoppers carry a shopping list of some description and this is taken as suggesting pre planning. As evidenced above, a large proportion of non list shoppers similarly plan their shopping trip, though no 'physical evidence' as such exists. However, if one were to shift '*list committed to memory*' from the non list side of the ledger to the list side ($n=43$), then a substantial amount (90%) of grocery shopping planning is seen to occur. This is shown in Table 3.

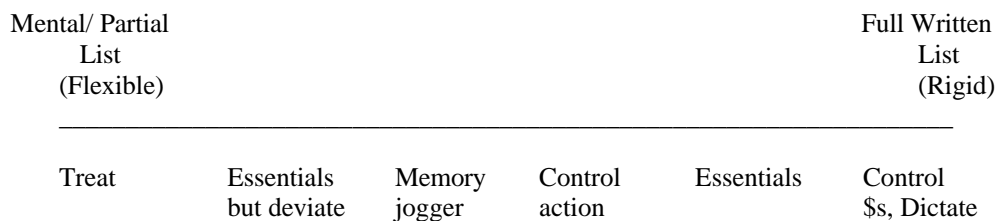
Table 3. Estimated Planning in Grocery Shopping

	Physical Lists Only		Physical and Mental Lists	
	n	%	n	%
List	122	67	165	90
Non list	61	33	18	10
Total	183	100	183	100

Combining physical and mental lists not only suggests a greater degree of planning in grocery buying (shown as ‘Physical and Mental Lists’ in Table 3), but also offers a fresh perspective - one that seemingly challenges current thinking not only about the amount of planning that takes place, but also the extent to which room is left over for shoppers to ‘impulse buy’.

If a substantial amount of non list grocery shopping activity can be considered as ‘planned’, then Figure 1 can be recast in light of suggested changes. Figure 2 attempts to highlight this in a more global manner.

Figure 2. Grocery Shopping Planning



(..... list can be committed to memory)

Without disrupting the basic parameters of the continuum (that has already been assigned to list shoppers), the addition of planning from non list shoppers presents a challenge. Based on an examination of initial responses, non list shoppers who suggest that they are planning their shopping event can be portrayed as covering and adding to the ‘middle ground’ of the continuum; that is, non list shoppers, like their list counterparts, undertake grocery shopping that could be characterised as falling between ‘essential but deviate’ and somewhere between ‘controlling action’ and ‘essentials’. Needless to say more work in this area needs to be considered.

Multiple Supermarket Usage and Proportion Spent

All respondents were asked to indicate whether or not on their last major grocery shopping trip they visited more than one supermarket and, on average, how their proportion of total grocery expenditure was committed to various supermarkets.

In terms of multiple supermarket usage, only 20% of respondents (n=36) indicated visiting two or more supermarkets. Of this group, the vast majority (92% or 18% of all shoppers) shopped at only one other supermarket. As seen in Table 4, there are no differences in multiple supermarket usage by presence or absence of a written shopping list.

Table 4. Multiple Supermarket Usage

	All Shoppers	List Shoppers	Non List Shoppers
No. of Supermarkets Last Visit	(188)	(122)	(61)
	%	%	%
1	80*	81	78
2	18	17	20
3	2	2	2

*** Note that no significant differences exist on the basis of Chi-Sq tests**

When it comes to how Palmerston North's grocery shoppers share their expenditure across the seven supermarkets of the city, Table 5 shows that one store dominates with 43% market share. Two others achieve shares of 18% and 12% respectively. However, there is no difference in share of expenditure across the supermarkets by presence or absence of a shopping list. And nor would we expect there to be given that we have established that shopping behaviour seems to hardly differ between list and non list shoppers.

Table 5. Average Proportion of Grocery Expenditure Spent at Palmerston North's Supermarkets

Stores	Average Proportions		
	All Shoppers (183)	List Shoppers (122)	Non List Shoppers (61)
	%	%	%
1	8	9	8
2	12	13	12
3	18	19	15
4	43	41	46
5	5	5	5
6	8	7	8
7	6	6	6

Note that no significant differences exist between shopper types based on a means test.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research has broadened the level of enquiry into planning the weekly or biweekly grocery shopping trip. Akin to our previous research, the current results have confirmed the demographic differences between list and non list shoppers; the former are more likely to be female, while the latter are more likely to be childless.

Our findings establish that written shopping lists provide a degree of comfort to their bearers. For some, this comfort is expressed by 'ensuring requirements' are obtained and hence a minor 'fill in' shopping trip would not be required. For others, comfort means fewer hassles in that the shopping process and the shopping bill are kept 'under control'. However, for most non list shoppers, the desire for 'comfort' and 'control' that the written shopping list seems to offer list bearers is largely absent. Instead, they opt for a list that is 'committed to memory' rather than one that is physically manifested on a piece of paper. While we recognise that the two groups differ on elements of 'comfort' and 'control', we also see parallels in their scripted shopping behaviour.

On the basis of our proposition that as many as 90% of grocery shoppers carry a physical or mental list with them to the supermarket, preplanning for the grocery shopping trip is seen as widespread. As a consequence, a rigid adherence to the proposition that impulse buying is prevalent seems questionable. Nevertheless, we suggest that all grocery shoppers operate under a script that allows varying amounts of flexibility - how much, however, varies by shopper personality, past experience and current circumstances. Abratt and Goodey (1990)'s research suggested that both list and non list shoppers included 'unplanned purchases' in their shopping baskets and we concur that both groups do included such items. However, whether these are strictly 'unplanned' or not becomes debatable because we posit that almost all shoppers, regardless of the presence or absence of a shopping list, have a 'flexible' approach to shopping which could be part of their overall shopping script.

Supermarket retailers can take some pleasure from this research in that almost all shoppers can, and do, shop with 'flexibility'. Certainly, about one third of list bearing shoppers (which equates to 23% of all shoppers) use a list to exert some form of moderation (through process or expenditure control) in the supermarket, but even these people have been found to 'overshop' their list (see Thomas and Garland, 1996). What may not have been evident prior to this research was the extent of planning undertaken by shoppers before their weekly or biweekly major grocery shopping trip. Anything that supermarket retailers can do to assist this pre planning ought to aid them in consolidating or even winning market share.

Like much academic work, this paper raises as many questions as it attempts to answer. However, in terms of future research, more work needs to be done with a larger sample of non list shoppers to confirm or add to the non list reasons developed for this research. Also in a confirmatory way, research should be undertaken on scripts to ascertain the degree to which flexibility exists in the scripts of different shoppers. Non list shoppers who '*commit a list to memory*' have been placed in a middle ground of the grocery planning continuum (refer to Figure 2). Research that tests the accuracy of placing a large proportion of non list shoppers in this range needs to be undertaken as well.

REFERENCES

- Abratt, R and Goodey, S D (1990). Unplanned buying and in-store stimuli in supermarkets. *Managerial and Decision Economics*, 11 (2), pp. 111-121.
- Iyer, E S and Ahlawat S S (1986). Deviations from a shopping plan: When and why do consumers not buy items as planned. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 14, pp.241-250.
- Knox, S and Chernatony, L de (1990). A buyer behaviour approach to merchandising and product policy. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 16 (6), pp.21-30.
- Lakshmi-Ratan, R A and Iyer, E S (1988). Similarity analysis of cognitive scripts. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 16 (2), pp. 36-42.
- Leigh, T W and McGraw, P F (1989). Mapping the procedural knowledge of industrial sales personnel: A script theoretic investigation. *Journal of Marketing*, 53 (January), pp.16-34.
- Putrevu, S and Ratchford, B T (1997). A model of search behaviour with an application to grocery shopping. *Journal of Retailing*, 73 (4), pp.463-486.
- Thomas, A and Garland R (1993). Supermarket shopping lists: Their effect on consumer expenditure. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 21 (2), pp.8-14.
- Thomas, A and Garland, R (1996). Susceptibility to goods on promotion in supermarkets. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 3 (4), pp. 233-239.