

SPECIAL OFFERS*

We tested supermarket price claims for three months and found dubious offers that might mislead customers

*THAT AREN'T SO SPECIAL



With food prices rising we are all looking for money-off deals. So we decided to investigate supermarket special offers to find out if they are as good as they seem. We bought a basket of goods in Asda, Marks & Spencer, Morrisons, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose every week for three months, and tracked wine prices online. We found offers that we think might mislead consumers – with some items on the shelves at 'half price' after only days at the higher price.

Genuine deals can only be a good thing, but there's a difference between cheap food and offers that might mislead you into thinking you're getting an extra-special bargain when you're not. This is especially important because of the way special offers dictate our buying habits – 59% of you say that you swap items you were intending to buy for those on special offer, and 38% say they frequently buy things that they weren't intending to because they are on offer*. Certain types of special offers, such as multibuys, are also causing some of us to throw out food, which is a waste of money and detrimental to the environment.

GOOD DEAL GUIDELINES

There are government guidelines intended to ensure any offers are a good deal. These say:

- An item should be at the higher price for 28 days before being on offer.
 - Overall, it shouldn't be on offer for longer than it was at the higher price.
- However, supermarkets don't have to do either of these if they put up a sign explaining their offer, or if something is going out of date. The rules also say that what's reasonable will depend on the individual circumstances.

This means that even offers we felt weren't good enough were still potentially compliant with the rules. Here are some examples of what our investigation uncovered:

- Asda raspberries advertised as part of the cut-price 'rollback' scheme when they weren't.
- Sainsbury's cherries at half price for eight weeks when it admitted they were only at the higher price for 15 days.
- Tesco Hardys Crest Cabernet Shiraz Merlot 75cl on offer for 12 weeks out of 14.
- Waitrose blueberries discounted for 10 weeks out of 14, and Marks & Spencer blueberries on offer for 13 weeks out of 14.
- Morrisons 250g packs of cherries not at the higher price in the shop we bought them (though it said there was a sign explaining this).

EXPERT VIEW

BE CLEAR ON PRICING



There are a huge number of 'special offers' in supermarkets. Despite this, the price of food is increasing faster than prices overall. This research shows that there's plenty more to be done to make prices in supermarkets clearer, and help us to control the real cost of what we buy.

And this certainly isn't the first time we've uncovered problems with supermarket pricing. When we carried out an investigation in 2008, we found similar pricing issues on products including fruit, wine and other groceries.

When we focused on wine 'special offers' earlier this year, our wine expert said that only one out of 10 wines he tasted would have been good value at the full price.

And when we asked you to send us examples of 'special offers' that you perceived to be 'ridiculous', we found that we received plenty of photos.

We'll be exploring ways to address these issues with both retailers and the government. Get in touch to tell us your views – email homeeditor@which.co.uk.

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We looked at a number of products that seem to be on offer frequently, such as cheese, bacon and fruit. We found that, of all the items that were often on offer, it was the fruit that had the greatest potential to baffle consumers.

Martin Fisher, pricing expert at the Trading Standards Institute, says there's more that can be done to ensure that special offers are transparent and easy for consumers to understand. He told us: 'Consumers could be made to feel they're getting an unbeatable, special bargain when they're not.'

We think that even some of the offers that had a sign explaining the offer in more detail might still confuse shoppers – especially as those in a hurry are unlikely to spend the time reading small disclaimers.



ARE SEASONAL FRUIT OFFERS TOO CONFUSING? Tell us what you think about special offers – do you think they generally offer good value? Do you buy things you weren't intending to? Do you think supermarkets need to be more transparent? Go to www.which.co.uk/specialoffers

WHAT'S ON OFFER? Our weekly spot checks suggest these items weren't at the higher price for long, which could make them seem better value than they are.

	PRODUCT TYPE AND PACK SIZE	WAS PRICE	OFFER PRICE	WHAT WE FOUND
ASDA	 ASDA Strawberries 400g	£2.17	£1.87	We never saw them at the higher price.
	 ASDA Raspberries 225g	£2.97	£2	They were sold for a number of weeks on 'rollback'. We never saw them on sale at the higher price.
	 ASDA First Cape Café Collection Crisp and Fruity White Wine 75cl	£5.28	£3	The highest price we saw this at was £4.98.
MORRISONS	 MORRISONS UK Strawberries 400g	£4	£1.90	These were half price for five non-consecutive weeks. Morrisons admitted they were only sold for seven days at full price.
	 MORRISONS Cherries 200g	£3	£1.50	We bought them on four occasions when they were half price. Morrisons said that they were only at the higher price for two weeks.
	 MORRISONS Cherries 250g	£4	£2	They were available to buy on three occasions when they were half price in a 'was £4 now £2' deal. But they were never available for us to buy at the higher price at the shop where we bought them during our three-month check. Morrisons said they were at the higher price in other shops.
M&S	 MARKS & SPENCER Sweet Jubilee Strawberries 300g	£3.99 then £2.99	£1.99	We never found these on sale at £3.99.
	 MARKS & SPENCER Cherries 500g	£7.99	£3.99	These were half price on the four occasions we managed to buy them. We didn't see the 500g pack on sale at the higher price, although packs of 450g were available at the higher price for two weeks before going on offer.
	 MARKS & SPENCER UK Strawberries 400g	£3.99 then £2.49	£1.99	We only found these on sale at the higher price of £3.99 for one week. They were on offer for seven weeks.
	 MARKS & SPENCER Blueberries 150g, 200g and 225g	£4.99 £3.99 or £3.49	£2.49	Although pack sizes varied, blueberries were always on offer whenever we managed to buy them (apart from one week, when 150g packs weren't on offer). No matter what size or offer, a pack of blueberries was £2.49.

SUPERMARKETS RESPOND

We challenged the supermarkets with the results of our investigation. This is how they explained what we found:

ASDA

'Asda strawberries and 225g packs of raspberries were mistakenly advertised as "rollback". First Cape wine was sold at £5.28 and then £4.98 for the required period, however the wrong higher price was shown. These were all due to human error and will be rectified.'

MARKS & SPENCER

'We always aim to follow guidelines on promotions and had done so here. This summer, due to the changes in the weather and the issues we have had with crop availability, we have, where appropriate, referred to a previous higher price which was not available for the full 28 days. Where we had further reductions,

we detailed intervening prices and made clear comparisons to enable our customers to understand these promotions. We always explain our offers and the price comparisons we make with in-store ticketing and décor.'

MORRISONS

'400g punnets of strawberries were on sale for seven days at the higher price. 200g packs of cherries were on sale for 14 days at the full price. 250g packs of cherries were on sale for seven days at the full price in many stores, though not in the shop

you bought them from. These offers complied with guidelines, as this information would have been displayed at point of sale.'

SAINSBURY'S

'UK strawberries were at the higher price for seven days. Raspberries were at the higher price for 14 days. We would never seek to mislead our customers, and so clearly communicated this information in stores. Packs of cherries were at the higher price for 15 days. However, due to human error this information was not displayed at point of sale. We apologise.'

	PRODUCT TYPE AND PACK SIZE	WAS PRICE	OFFER PRICE	WHAT WE FOUND
Sainsbury's	 SAINSBURY'S Cherries 250g	£4	£2	They were half price during the eight weeks out of 10 we were able to buy them. Sainsbury's said they were at the higher price for 15 days.
	 SAINSBURY'S UK Strawberries 400g	£4	£2	These were half price for nine weeks out of the 10 they were available. Sainsbury's said that they were at the higher price for seven days before going on offer.
	 SAINSBURY'S Raspberries 225g	£4	£2	These were on sale at half price during the seven weeks when we could buy them. Sainsbury's said that they were at the higher price for 14 days.
TESCO	 TESCO UK Strawberries 400g	£3.99 then £2.99	£1.99	These were discounted for the 12 weeks they were available. We never managed to buy them at the higher price of £3.99.
	 TESCO Cherries 250g	£3.99	£1.99	These were half price for the seven weeks they were available. We didn't manage to buy them at the higher price.
	 TESCO Raspberries 225g	£3.99	£1.99	These were half price for six weeks. We never managed to buy them at the higher price.
	 TESCO Hardys Crest Cabernet Shiraz Merlot 75cl	£10.99	£5.49 or £7.99	Was on offer for 12 weeks out of 14. For 10 of these it was half price – 'was £10.99 now £5.49'; for the other two weeks it was sold in a 'was £10.99 now £7.99' deal.
Waitrose	 WAITROSE UK Strawberries 400g	£3.99	£1.99	We only managed to buy these at the higher price for one week. They were then advertised as 'half price' for ten weeks.
	 WAITROSE Cherries 450g	£6.99 then £4.99	£3.49	These were on offer on all seven occasions we managed to buy them, five times at 'half price'. We never found them for sale at the higher price of £6.99.
	 WAITROSE Raspberries 200g	£3.79	£1.89	They were only available for us to buy at the higher price for two weeks – while also on multibuy (£3.79 each or two for £5). They were then advertised as half price for ten weeks.
	 WAITROSE Blueberries 180g/200g	£3.99	£1.99	These were half price for ten weeks before being offered at £2.89 or '2 for £4'. For the first three weeks the pack size was 180g; afterwards it was 200g – the same price was charged for both.

TESCO

'We have strict rules in place on pricing. We regret that these rules were not followed in these instances but can reassure customers that mistakes such as these are rare.'

WAITROSE

'We would never intend to mislead customers. We're nearing the end of a piece of research (including advice from trading standards) to ensure our special offers are absolutely within the framework of the law, and are completely clear to consumers.'

which? WORKS FOR YOU

Which? wants debate and scrutiny around the rising cost of food. We want a better understanding of why prices are rising and what can be done.

We want consumers to have accurate information that allows them to control their shopping bills, so want special offers that provide genuine value for money. We also want greater price transparency that enables shoppers to compare product prices easily.

Over the coming months we'll be talking to retailers, food manufacturers and producers,



experts and government about these issues. We'll be making sure that consumers' concerns are properly understood and that sensible, practical steps are taken to give us value for money.