

Out of the way?



Alcohol displays in supermarkets

Introduction

Sales of alcoholic drinks in supermarkets are on the rise in the UK, fuelled by heavy discounts and longer licensing hours. Alcohol is now more widely available than ever in the off-trade. It is often found on shelves next to groceries such as bread and milk, and may be cheaper than bottled water.¹ 70% of respondents to an Alcohol Concern survey of 1,000 shoppers in 2010 expressed support for alcohol displayed in stores to be restricted to a single area of the premises.² This paper looks in more detail at the issue of alcohol and supermarkets, and makes recommendations for action.

Sales in supermarkets

Supermarkets have been able to obtain licenses to sell alcohol in England and Wales since the early 1960s. Sainsbury's was granted a licence in 1962, with others soon following.³ Over recent decades, sales from supermarkets (and off-licenses) have steadily increased and now account for nearly half of all alcohol sold.⁴ Moreover, since the introduction of 24-hour licensing laws in 2005, the number of supermarkets and stores with permission to sell alcohol around the clock has increased significantly, up 27% between 2008 and 2010.⁵

Alongside this, overall consumption levels have been rising in England and Wales since the Second World War and it is widely accepted that increased consumption is directly associated with the growing affordability of alcohol. In 2007, alcohol was 75% more affordable than in 1980, relative to average household income.⁶ Supermarkets, in particular, have been heavily criticised for selling discounted alcohol⁷ and some supermarkets have admitted to selling drinks below cost (i.e. less than the wholesale price) to increase sales.⁸

As a consequence of the increasing affordability and availability of alcohol in the off-trade, there has been a change in people's drinking patterns, with a noticeable shift towards increased home consumption.⁹ Recent statistics also suggest that those of us who drink at home often pour much more than standard pub measures of drinks, and are less likely to stick to drinking guidelines.¹⁰

Alcohol on display

Unlike the tobacco, which is sold in a separate area of a supermarket, alcohol may be available to select from a number of normal food and drink aisles, as well as being dotted elsewhere throughout the store. The importance of dispersing alcohol displays in order to increase sales has been recognised by the drinks industry. Carlsberg brewers, for example, urge retailers to "create stacks of your promotional beers" and "site stacks away from the beer fixture to drive impulse purchase."¹¹



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In Scotland, licensing legislation requires that displays of alcohol for consumption away from the premises must be confined to a single area of the store. This has been in response to a growing concern that alcohol displays on the ends of aisles, directly inside the shop doorway, and next to everyday groceries, encourage consumers to think of alcohol as an ordinary commodity, rather than a potentially harmful drug. In England and Wales there are currently no such requirements.

"It has become common practice to sell wine alongside the ready meals in the 'grab and go' fridges. It sends a subliminal message to the busy worker/ shopper that they might like to, and it is indeed normal to consume alcohol alongside their evening meal. 'Go on – you've had a hard day – you deserve it!'"

British Liver Trust¹²

In order to find out more about how supermarkets display alcohol in their stores, Alcohol Concern commissioned an independent research company to undertake a snapshot survey of four major supermarkets in Cardiff, recording where alcoholic items were located. The key findings are presented in the table opposite:

Table 1: Alcohol Concern snapshot survey findings, December 2010¹³

Sainsbury's:

- Discounted alcohol (wine, spirits, beer) found at front of store entrance.
- Alcohol found on seasonal aisle, main food aisles, end of food aisles, and end of alcohol aisles.
- Examples included bottles of wine located next to soft drinks, bottles of spirits next to fruit, boxes of beer next to cheeses, spirits sold next to mince pies, and bottles of wine next to fruit juice.

Asda:

- Discounted cider found at front of store entrance.
- Alcohol found on seasonal aisle, end of food aisles, end of alcohol aisles, and free standing.
- Examples included bottles of wine at the fish, meat and deli counters, and cans of cider next to the hot chicken counter.

Tesco:

- Alcohol displayed on seasonal aisle, main food aisles, end of food aisles, end of alcohol aisles and free standing.
- Bottles of wine found at the tills area.
- Bottles of wine next to the dairy counter, bottles of spirits next to bread and tea, sparkling wine next to party food, and cans of cider next to crisps.

Morrisons:

- Alcohol found on main food aisles, end of alcohol aisles and free standing.
- Bottles of wine found displayed next to cakes, boxes of beer next to the fruit and vegetables, wine available next to cola, and bottles of champagne next to the milk.

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Discussion

The survey findings highlight that it is now common for alcohol to be displayed throughout supermarket stores, beyond the specific alcohol aisle. Larger stores in particular accommodate numerous locations in which to display alcoholic products, including doorways, checkout areas, end-of-aisle displays, and free standing displays. They also frequently undertake 'cross-merchandising', whereby drinks are displayed next to matched food items to encourage purchases. Very often such drinks are available at discount prices. Such practices fuel the acceptability of alcohol in society, reinforcing the notion that alcohol is a normal and desirable part of our culture, rather than an intoxicating and potentially harmful drug.

According to research by Sheffield University, between 30-40% of alcohol sold by supermarkets come from promotions.¹⁴ Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that supermarkets have vigorously defended their policy of promoting alcoholic drinks, arguing that the majority of customers buy alcohol "as part of their weekly shop".¹⁵ This, defence, of course, tells us nothing about just how much alcohol is being bought from supermarkets, nor whether it is being consumed within recommended guidelines.

Alcohol Concern proposes that all alcohol should be displayed in a single area of the store premises (although separate checkout areas for alcohol are not considered practical). This would require customers to make a conscious decision to go to that area in order to select alcoholic products, as well as reducing the likelihood of impulse buying. The Welsh Assembly Government has backed the introduction of separate display areas,¹⁶ whilst a survey in 2010 of 1,000 people in Wales who had purchased alcohol in the previous three months found that 70% of respondents supported the proposal, with only 20% against.¹⁷

Alcohol Concern recommendations:

1. The UK Government should introduce regulations in England and Wales, in line with those in Scotland, requiring that displays of alcohol in supermarkets and all other off-sales premises be confined to a single area.
2. Supermarkets and all other off-sales premises should make greater efforts to inform the public of the dangers of alcohol, specifically providing clear health warnings both where alcohol is displayed and at the point of sale.
3. In order to reduce the problem of deep discounting of alcohol by supermarkets, a minimum price of 50p per unit of alcohol should be introduced, in line with the recommendations of the UK's Chief Medical Officers.

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