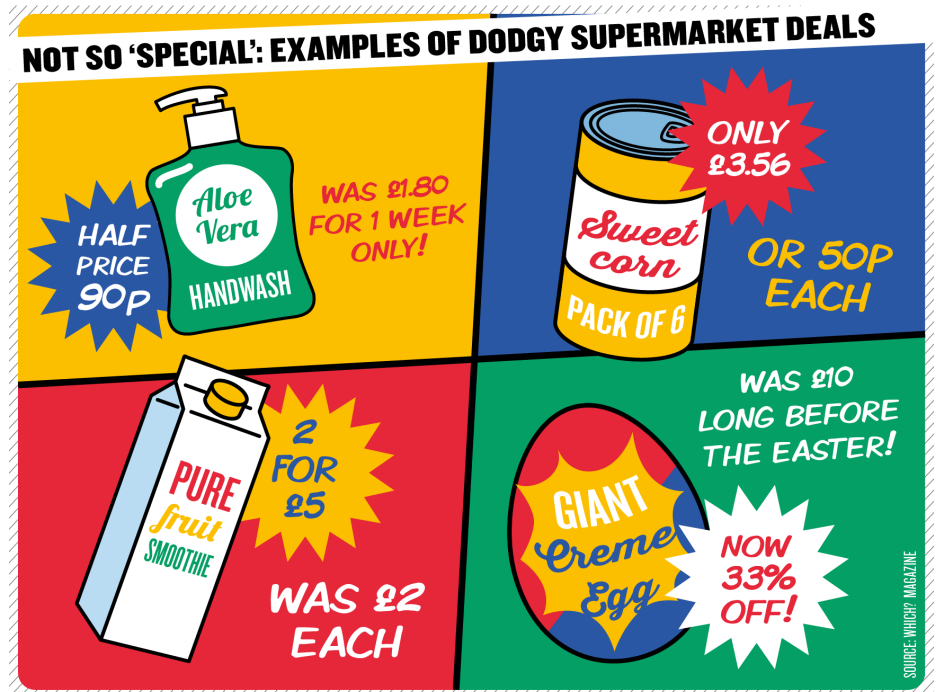


# Shops 'special offer' dirty tricks exposed

The consumer magazine Which? has published a damning catalogue of misleading offers used by supermarkets to lure shoppers into spending extra money. How can you avoid being duped?



If you walked into a supermarket in the run-up to Easter, you were probably confronted an enticing array of chocolate eggs emblazoned with stickers proclaiming one-off deals. Sainsbury's and Tesco claimed to have slashed the price of a giant Creme Egg by a third. Ocado boasted that its £5 Kit Kat Easter egg had previously been on sale for £7.50.

Neither of these offers was a lie. But they were perhaps a little misleading: the higher original prices which made the deal seem so sweet had only applied in February, weeks before Easter. In other words, the supermarkets had put the chocolate on sale at an inflated price at a time when they knew that few people would be paying attention.

This practice of artificially creating seasonal deals is just one of several questionable tricks which have been exposed this week in a 'super-complaint' to the UK's trade regulator.

The complaint was lodged by Which? magazine, which campaigns on behalf of consumers. It claims that shoppers have lost hundreds of millions of pounds to sneaky advertising and false 'deals'.

Which? splits the offers into several categories. There are 'dodgy multi-buys', in which the cost of an individual item is bumped up before customers are offered a discount when buying in bulk. Asda, for instance, increased the cost of a packet of rice from £1 to £1.58 days before introducing a 'two for £2' deal. In other cases product prices have been temporarily increased, then cut to something like their original level and advertised as special offers.

Finally, some supermarkets have given the impression that larger packs are cheaper while actually increasing the price. A 'special value' six-can pack of sweetcorn at Tesco, for instance, was £3.56 — but shoppers could also buy four for just £2.

The supermarkets have vigorously defended their actions, insisting that these examples are isolated errors, not part of any nefarious plan. But Which? magazine suspects otherwise. If the regulator upholds their complaint, there could be serious legal consequences for the companies concerned.

## DEAL OR NO DEAL?

Many incensed shoppers suspect that supermarkets are deliberately hoodwinking their customers. If so, it's an outrage, they say. Until these companies are saddled with some strict new rules about pricing, we have no defence against exploitation and manipulation.

Companies will always try to squeeze every penny they can out of you, reply more cynical customers — that's their job. No amount of regulation will protect you from these sleights of hand. If we want to be sure of a good deal, the best solution is to learn to read adverts with a critical eye. It's time to get wise to the supermarkets' tricks.

## Q & A

**Q** So is there any way to be sure I'm getting a good deal?

**A** With some of these deals, there's no easy way to check. But you can make yourself a little more savvy about what's on offer by learning to quickly make calculations and comparisons to work out how much

something really costs. In general, it's also worth being a little sceptical of anything that's not on offer for an obvious reason: it may sometimes be a genuine bargain, but the shop wouldn't be advertising the offer if they weren't also getting a good deal.

**Q** Will the supermarkets be punished?

**A** It's unlikely that anything will happen for a while at least. The market regulator has

90 days to respond, and if they do decide that the complaints have merit they'll talk to the supermarkets before launching an investigation.

## SOME PEOPLE SAY...

*'A bargain's not a bargain unless it's something you need.'*

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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### WORD WATCH

**Super-complaint** – This is an actual term for a particular kind of major complaint submitted to the Competition and Markets Authority. Only a small group of consumer watchdogs have the right to submit these complaints; they do so when they believe that an industry practice is seriously harming customers' interests.

**Regulator** – Until last year con-

sumer industries were regulated by the Office of Fair Trading. Now this has been abolished and replaced by the Competition and Markets Authority, which is responsible for promoting fair competition.

**Which? magazine** – A not-for-profit magazine founded in 1957 to help ordinary people make informed choices about which products to buy. It was originally

conceived by Labour's Michael Young as a government project; when the party rejected his idea, he set it up as an independent organisation.

**Plan** – This is not the first time in recent months that supermarkets have come under fire for unfair practices. They have also been criticised for underpaying suppliers. This is partly down to ferocious competition between major shops.

### YOU DECIDE

1. Are you more likely to buy something if it's on special offer? Should you be?
2. How much do you trust big companies like supermarkets?

### ACTIVITIES

1. Look online or in a shop and find a special offer. Then compare it to a similar product elsewhere. Is it really a good deal? Do you think the offer is misleading?

2. Imagine you are in a shop looking for orange juice. A 900ml carton costs £3.20 but has a 25% discount. A 400ml carton costs £1.25 but is on offer as 'buy one get one half price'. Which is more per litre? Try without a calculator and then check.

 **BECOME AN EXPERT** Check our website for a selection of useful links to videos and further reading.

 **NOTES**

