Shopping Habits Snapshot

What 48 grocery shoppers told me about how they plan, save, and decide.

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Table of Contents

Why did I create this survey?
Who answered?
How do shopping decisions begin?
- Menu Maker
- Routine Shopper
- Value Optimizers

How do they plan their trips?
Why would they change their minds?
What is frustrating shoppers?
Opportunities
- Menu Makers
- Routine Shoppers
- Value Optimizers

Conclusion

Why did I create this survey?

In a nutshell, I was frustrated and needed emotional validation.

At the end of March, I lost my job, so my husband became the only one working, which was stressful for both of us. With more free time, I tried to help by taking on more household errands, like grocery shopping. And I was struggling.

Since he works nights, my husband handled most of the grocery shopping for years, taking advantage of the quieter hours during the day. Over time, he built a mental model of prices across our local stores.

One week, my husband pointed out that I'd missed a better sale at another store. That led to a long conversation about how many stores are worth visiting in a week. At what point do the savings stop outweighing the extra time and gas? For him, it was never a question. He shopped multiple times a week at various stores, stopping by based on sale prices and other errands in the same area.

While my days were mostly filled with resume submissions, interviews and half-assed attempts at thought leadership in my industry, I was struggling to do what he did.

I didn’t have the historical data he had in his head. Grocery apps weren't as helpful as I expected. Weekly flyers required jumping between multiple apps and websites. Comparing prices across stores was cumbersome, even though that's exactly what shoppers are encouraged to do.

> “I'm a systems person. I needed a system, so I built one.”

I'm a systems person. I needed a system, so I built one. Using Python and AI, I created a tool that collects weekly sale prices from local grocery flyers and organizes them into a spreadsheet. It’s not exactly part of our weekly routine, but it helps me feel on top of things and make the most of our time and money. Despite some eye rolling when I started, my husband now asks if I can email the spreadsheet to him each week.

As I continued refining the process, I found myself wondering: am I solving a problem that only I had, or were other shoppers running into the same frustrations?

That question became this survey.

I was less interested in producing statistically representative research and more in exploring how people plan grocery trips, what frustrates them most, and whether common shopping patterns point to opportunities for better tools and experiences. In short, I was looking for “my” people.

As I analyzed the responses, I noticed that people are trying to solve all sorts of problems with shopping. Some are byproducts of how people choose to shop. Others are simply unmet needs waiting for better solutions. Three shopping mindsets emerged, and each one responded to value differently.

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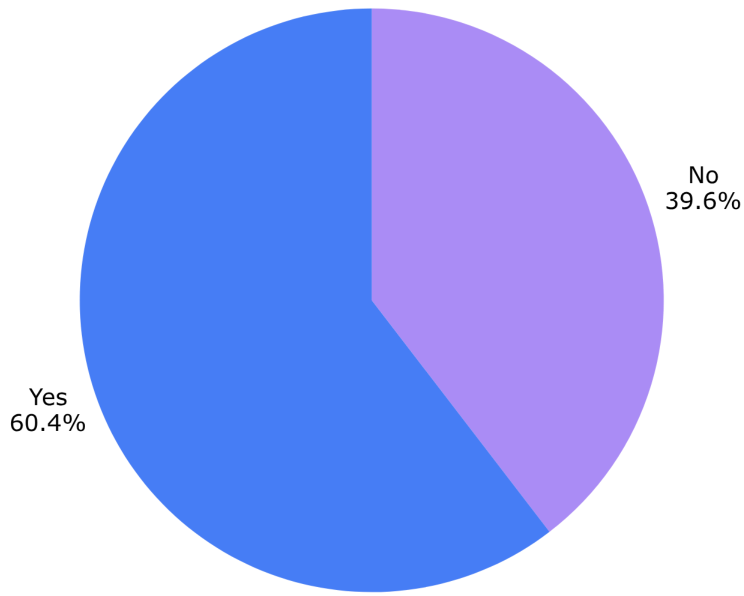
Who answered?

My sample size is 48 people: mostly older (42% are 55+), and from one- (30%) and two-person (53%) households.

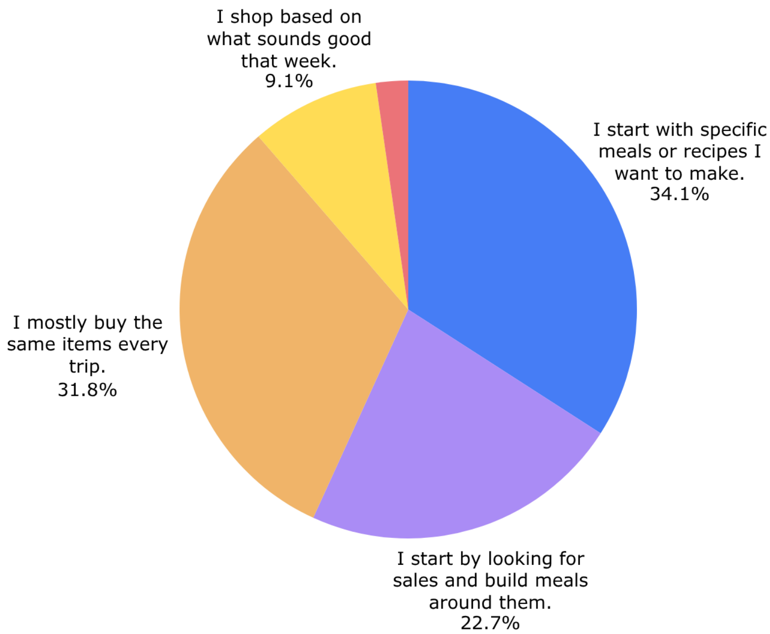
Most people said they plan their meals.



Meal planning was common, but that wasn’t the whole picture. Just knowing if someone planned meals didn’t show how they actually shopped. To figure that out, I had to see where their buying decisions started.

How do shopping decisions begin?

Even though most people said they plan meals, that doesn’t mean their shopping always starts with a recipe or meal plan. So I asked, “When you're grocery shopping, what usually determines what you buy?”



Roughly two-thirds of our audience is evenly divided between those who start shopping with specific meals and menus (“**Menu Makers”**) and those who mostly buy the same things each trip (“**Routine Shoppers**”). The next largest group was shoppers who started with sale items (“**Value Optimizers**”).

As I continued my research, these three groups kept resurfacing because each shopping method has its own set of advantages and disadvantages. Don’t get me wrong, staying within a budget was a universal concern (41% of respondents), but the way budget decisions are made is nuanced. And whether you’re more concerned about an item being out of stock or about planning weekly meals depends greatly on how you plan your trips.

Menu Maker:

This shopper begins with meals, recipes, or nutritional goals, then works backward to build a shopping list.

- Uses shopping lists frequently (50%)
- Occasionally uses store apps and coupons (27%)
- Least likely to respond to loyalty programs (20%)

While they definitely have meal planning on lockdown, Menu Makers reported the most pain points around execution:

- Staying on budget (40%)
- Building shopping lists (33%)
- Healthy ingredients (33%)
- Difficulty using store/loyalty apps (27%)

Menu Makers are very likely to switch stores based on prices, but many said they'd also consider changing based on product quality. When talking about times they actually changed their shopping behavior, they cited:

- switching brands because of sales
- buying extra when ingredients are discounted
- taking advantage of coupons

Routine Shopper:

This shopper values consistency.

- May keep a mental list (Even 50/50 split on making a shopping list)
- Sometimes uses recipes (again, a 50/50 split)

- Surprisingly adaptable when value appears

Because Routine Shoppers purchase the same thing each week, they are most affected when supplies run low. And the concern/reality of missing items can throw a wrench in any plans you’re trying to make. Their pain points:

- Out-of-stock items (46%)
- Weekly planning (38.5%)
- Sticking to a budget (38.5%)

They were more likely to switch stores based on convenience and location than on prices or coupons.

Value Optimizers

This shopper places value and savings above everything else.

This is the group I currently fall into. We report using apps and digital coupons more than the other two groups. And, while we use technology to save money, we aren’t necessarily on the hunt for more apps and gadgets.

- Heavy shopping-list users (90%)
- Heavy grocery-app users (60%)
- Heavy coupon users (60%)

Either because of circumstances or personality type, we are all about saving. While the other two personas expressed frustrations that seemed to be a by-product of their preferred shopping method, we are most upset that our preferred shopping method isn’t doing what we want it to do: get the best value. Our biggest pain points are

- Sticking to a budget (33%)
- Comparing prices between stores (33%)

When talking about things that influenced purchase behavior, we'll mention:

- BOGO offers
- Sales
- Bulk pricing
- recommendations from local Facebook groups

How do they plan their trips?

Most of my shoppers (68%) rely on shopping lists, making them by far the most common planning tool. Recipes and grocery apps also make a decent showing.

If we look at these results through the lens of our top three sources of where decisions start: recipe-first, repeat shoppers and sales-first, we see new patterns emerge.

Planning Tool	**Menu Makers**	**Routine Shopper**	**Value Optimizers**
Shopping lists	53%	50%	90%
Recipes	67%	50%	20%
Grocery apps	27%	21%	60%
Digital coupons	27%	7%	60%
Loyalty offers	20%	29%	40%

The group that started their trips buying more or less the same things every week was still likely to use shopping lists and/or recipes to inform their decisions. The Value Optimizer group was most likely to use shopping lists and was a heavier technology user.

Why would they change their minds?

Respondents are asking for better savings tools. The top three things cited that would change their shopping behavior, focused on spending less: alerts for items they already buy, easier price comparison and personalized deals. My shoppers were looking for personalized value rather than individual discounts. So, not “more coupons.” But “the right coupon, delivered at the right time.” As a lifecycle marketer, this sounds very familiar.

I went into this expecting meal bundles and recipe-based shopping to perform better in this section. A large study from last year showed that “nearly 40% (of shoppers) said they’d like their store to be more helpful” in deciding what to buy (Grocery Dive). But my respondents overwhelmingly favored price transparency and personalized savings over convenience features. It could be due to the economic downturn or to a sample skewed toward empty nesters and retirees, but my shoppers are currently more motivated by economic value than by reducing effort.

> “My respondents overwhelmingly favored price transparency and personalized savings over convenience features”

What is frustrating shoppers?

Nearly half of respondents said sticking to a budget is one of their biggest grocery frustrations. After that, there's a second tier of challenges centered around planning: meal planning, finding items in stock and comparing prices. So, if I were to paint a picture with these numbers, it would depict shoppers trying to maximize value while navigating uncertainty.

These numbers get interesting when you group the results by the tools they use to help with shopping:

Planning tool	% who cited budgeting as a frustration
Grocery store apps	63%
Loyalty offers	64%
Shopping lists	52%
Recipes	48%

Digital coupons	46%

You'd think that people who use store apps and loyalty programs have solved the budgeting problem, but instead, the people who say they struggle the most with budgeting are the ones who use these apps.

When we look at the last time someone changed their shopping behavior, almost every story centered around one of four things:

- Sale price
- Coupon
- Bulk discount
- Store availability

So, we can see why grocery fliers haven't changed much in the last 100 years or so. They quickly outline their deals and what's available in a succinct way.

> "The people who say they struggle the most with budgeting are the ones who use these apps."

Opportunities

Menu Makers

For Menu Makers, grocery stores need to put themselves where the recipes are. While this group starts their purchasing decisions with a menu plan, they can finish it based on price. So, (1) help them turn their recipes into a shopping plan and (2) help them execute these recipes while getting a better value. They would respond to:

- Saved shopping lists
- Personalized sale notifications based on past purchases
- Meal bundles

Routine Shoppers

The most important thing to remember for Routine Shoppers is to help them maintain that routine, and then follow it up with value. This group would most strongly respond to:

- "Buy Again" shopping lists
- Automatic substitutions
- Personalized sale notifications for favorite products
- Subscriptions

Value Optimizers

For the Value Optimizers, ensure they have information about your best prices before they visit your store. They are coming armed with your loyalty app, and their list is already locked in. What they'd actually love is

- Sale alerts

- Price history
- Personalized promotions
- Budget tracking

Conclusion

If I were to continue the research, I’d want to involve a much larger sample group. I’d want to explore whether these habits hold nationally or simply reflect this particular group:

- Do younger shoppers have different expectations?
- Do shoppers use third-party apps that don’t belong to grocery stores?
- How do shoppers aggregate and compare offers?

While this survey isn't representative of all shoppers, it surfaced several recurring behaviors and questions worth exploring further. I saw myself in all three categories, in different phases of my life. I was more of a Routine Shopper when I had young children. Now, I’m a Value Optimizer by circumstance. My husband will say he’s a Value Optimizer if you ask him, and he may have been several years ago. But his behavior now leans heavily toward a Routine Shopper. This leads me to theorize that people move between these categories as their circumstances change.

But one thing all my shoppers have in common is that they need tools that support the way they already think. Menu Makers, Routine Shoppers, and Value Optimizers are solving different problems. So, treating them like one audience means designing experiences that fit none of them particularly well.

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