

Knowing Where to Look: Insider Tips on Product Placement in Stores

For advice about collecting data in the retail environment, we turned to store owner (and Modoc County Project Director) Bill Hall.



Q: When going into stores, how should data collectors scan the layout to find the products on the survey quickly?

Bill: Almost all stores are set up the same way. Smaller convenience stores and liquor stores basically follow the same layout principles as a large grocery store, just on a smaller scale.

Q: So what's the first thing data collectors should do when arriving at a store?

Bill: First, observe the outside of the store. Jot down a few notes on paper about anything you'll need to answer later so you don't have to go in and out several times. [Depending on the modules your LLA is doing, you may have to observe the amount of all signage, product-specific ads and/or price promotions, amount of litter and graffiti, presence of bike racks, water dispenser, murals, etc. Keep a list of things you need to look for outside so you can take notes before going into the store.]

Q: How should data collectors act in the store?



Bill: You know, retailers don't care. Everyone is on their cell phone when shopping these days, so they are used to people having handheld devices. They won't know what you're doing; they'll just think you are texting. San Diego County has already started their data collection and said they never once got questioned about it, never had to give out the letter. So it should not be a big deal.

Q: What should they look for first once they go inside?

Bill: Walk the perimeter of the store – the outside aisles along the walls – where you'll find the deli, bakery, produce department and the refrigerated/frozen section. These are all areas that require electrical access. That's where you'll probably find beers [and milk]. In addition, some stores have dedicated ends or aisles for beverages in the center of the store that are back-to-back.

Pharmacies are usually in the back of the store, beer and wine will be close to the deli, staples are in the middle of the store, and high value products like tobacco are on power walls – vendor-supplied displays with a wide array of products. As you scout the layout, count the registers. In addition to the checkout lanes up front, there may be separate registers in the pharmacy, bakery, hot deli and coffee bar (but don't count registers for separate vendors like Starbucks).

Q: Sometimes it's hard to find the price on things. Any advice on that?

Bill: Almost every item in store will have shelf tag (not a sign) that gives the regular price of each item, its unit size, bar code, and cost per serving. Even if the product is not currently stocked, you should still see the tag which means it is sold there. So if you don't see any sale sign, that's where you'll see the price.

Q: It can be overwhelming to try to locate specific tobacco products when there are so many different brands and flavors. What's the best way to go about it?

Bill: Tobacco companies pay retailers to place their products exactly the way they want. They often even provide the shelving and displays. Altria (Phillip Morris) has the biggest market share (and pays the most for best placement). That's why Marlboros are always prominently displayed at the top of a power wall where they are most visible (from the waist level up). Other companies are left with the remaining shelves in less advantageous spots for their products. That's why Newport, Camel and other products use extra displays, signage and promotions on countertops and other areas in order to be seen.



Q: What about alcohol? Are there similar cues with those products?

Bill: Yes. The most expensive products are displayed on the left of any case or fridge because our eye is trained to scan from left to right. Bud Light, the #1 seller, is always near the handle of the refrigerator where you open the door. Less expensive beers are further away. Depending in the size of the store and the alcohol selection, alcopops – formerly known as wine coolers – usually have their own section



(with Smirnoff and Mike's hard lemonade being the biggest sellers). The big 32 oz bottles of malt liquor often have their own shelves because stores need to maximize the space to accommodate their tall size. Wines then also often have their own shelf space.

Q: *Any other strategies you can offer?*

Bill: Get into a few stores and get your hands on some of the products so you can see what they look like up close and notice where they are placed. Don't feel self-conscious. Retailers are used to customers asking about products. Just go in and ask, "Can I see those Swisher Sweets? I want to see what flavor that is." Once you've had a look you can say, "No, I'm looking for something different."

Remember, you only need one product for each category. Identify which questions call for one of any type or flavor, and then practice looking for the brand or flavor that is most commonly sold in your area. You'll be really surprised at how similarly stores are laid out.

For more information on some of the tobacco marketing practices in the retail environment, see the [Tobacco Retail Environment Fact Sheet](#) produced by CDPH.

Photos courtesy of: Bill Hall, Stanford Prevention Research Center, Shutterstock, Katrina Wyatt and Daniel Comins