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Welcome to *Les petits caractères*, Option consommateurs' podcast that takes a critical look at consumer issues of interest to *you*. I'm your host, Marianne Spear. Today, we're covering a special topic as part of Option consommateurs' campaign to inform consumers of the six most common grocery store traps. Our guest is Sylvie De Bellefeuille.

Hello, Sylvie.

Hi, Marianne.

How are you?

Very well, thank you.

Are you happy to be talking about today's subject?

I'm very happy to be discussing this, because it's so topical. We know that people are often mad when they do their grocery shopping these days. They feel like they're being tricked somehow. So we're going to identify the biggest grocery store traps and look at how to avoid them as much as possible.

I'm also glad we're talking about it. In the past year, or even two, whenever I shop for groceries, I expect it to cost more—you know, I keep hearing about inflation and all—but at a certain point, I ask myself if it's really inflation or if I'm being influenced by what I see in the media and changing my buying habits out of fear that prices will continue to rise. And then, like a lot of consumers, I just feel completely lost.

Well, it's probably a bit of both. Data published in Canada's Food Price Report 2024, compiled by Dalhousie University, University of Guelph, University of Saskatchewan and The University of British Columbia, shows that grocery prices nationwide went up by 5.9% between 2022 and 2023, with the greatest increase in Québec, at 6.7%. So yes, it *is* more expensive. But paradoxically, people are buying less in grocery stores than before, which means their food

spending has *decreased*. They scale down on quantity or quality, or they switch to cheaper products. Often, it's a question of budget reallocation. Groceries aren't the only things going up in price. With rent and debt repayment costing more, people have to cut back somewhere, and unfortunately, it's often on food.

Okay, then there is a clear increase.

Absolutely.

Alright, are you ready to talk about the first trap?

I am. The first trap you might come across is discounts for multiple purchases. This isn't a new practice, but it has become more common. They try to get you to buy more units by offering a discount on more units. There are two ways to display this. A product may say 2/\$5, for example. If that's the only thing indicated on the price label, then you don't have to buy two to get the discount, you can buy just one for \$2.50. Now, they know you're often influenced by displays, and if you see 2/\$5, you're more likely to automatically put two in your cart, so this is how they incite you to buy more. For some people, it's worth it. When you have a family and you can afford it, buying more may be advantageous. But when you live alone or you don't necessarily have the money to buy things before you need them, it might be less beneficial. If the price is the same for one as it is for two, it's more a question of what suits your lifestyle.

Actual needs.

Exactly.

In other situations, they may say 2/\$5 or \$2.99 if you buy 1, for instance. This means you *have* to buy more to get the discount. My example is rather simple. Numbers are sometimes much higher, involving the purchase of a lot more units. If the product is perishable, it can lead to food waste. It's not easy to figure out, and not everyone can buy a lot of products in advance. You need storage space, and you also need the money to pay for things you won't use until later. You really have to be careful with this.

Because it also depends on cash flow. It's great to buy in advance, but there are other expenses that come up day to day, month to month.

Plus, they highlight 2/\$5, with \$2.99 if you buy 1 often in smaller type on the price label. So if you're shopping, you take a quick look and you only see 2/\$5, you buy just one because you think it'll cost you \$2.50, then you're in for an unpleasant surprise at checkout, which is never fun. And again, my example is simple, with numbers that divide evenly. Their numbers sometimes don't. You need to be watchful, because that's the best solution to this problem right now. What we'd ideally like to see is better price display management that allows consumers to easily figure out the actual cost per unit.

I often have to use my calculator app at the grocery store.

And that shouldn't happen. You should be able to shop without having to calculate prices. Labels need to be clearer, not require elaborate mathematical computations to figure out how much grocery items cost.

No kidding. That's why I check the label that always indicates the price per 100 millilitres or 100 milligrams.

Yes, price per unit of measure is helpful in many ways. For discounts, but also other things we'll discuss later. It's probably the most practical tool for comparing apples to apples.

It's just, when there's a discount on an item, the label with the price per unit of measure isn't necessarily updated to reflect this discount. That's when I start doing my little calculations.

Well, the law isn't clear on how to indicate price per unit of measure when there's a discount, making it a little harder to work out. And if there are two discount prices, like 2/\$5 or \$2.99 if you buy 1, which one is used to calculate the price per unit of measure? Getting that information can be difficult.

Agreed. Also, I do my grocery shopping on Sunday to make my meals for the week, but if I were there with four children between two soccer practices, I probably wouldn't stop to pay as much attention.

Exactly.

Great.

The second trap is flyers and displays. First, flyers. The truth is that they can help you find out what's on sale so you can plan your meals and get more for your money. I'm not saying that you shouldn't check them, just that you should be alert when you do. The best deals are usually on the cover pages. Often, a protein is on sale, so one week, it's chicken, the next, it's ground beef, and you can pretty much count on those. But when you get to the inside pages, some of the products are on sale and others are regularly priced. The flyer may randomly advertise broccoli at \$4.99. Obviously, that's no sale. Just because something's in the flyer doesn't make it a good deal. You have to use your judgement, and unfortunately, the best way to do so at this point is by knowing the market, having an idea of what things cost in general. Then you can tell that \$4.99 for broccoli isn't a bargain at all.

Not to mention that flyers show certain things in large type or red, and that can be misleading.

Very true. The same goes for displays. Products are sometimes featured on special builds—often paid for by the manufacturer—or located on aisle ends to catch the eye. You have to be careful there too. They may be on sale, or they may be on view to generate purchases. These types of promotions are quite common. For example, it's back-to-school time and practical lunch items are on aisle ends. Yes, it reminds you to pick up granola bars and juice boxes, but are they really on special? Not always. Pay close attention, try to avoid impulse buying, and be aware of prices so you can tell if the items are actually a deal or if they're just being highlighted to get you to buy something you normally wouldn't.

There are a number of apps that allow you to access all flyers in just a few clicks. I don't want to promote any app in particular, and I know you have to be careful about the personal information you give out, but even without subscribing, you can usually see Maxi's and Metro's offers, which allows you to compare prices.

I think comparison shopping is still the best way to get the most bang for your buck.

And if the comparison shows that an item is cheaper at one place, it doesn't necessarily mean I'll shop there and elsewhere, it just means that I'll know when something isn't really on sale, like the broccoli in that flyer.

Precisely. The idea is to make choices based on what you really need and the discounts available so you can profit as much as possible. Well, not exactly "profit," but get more for your money, let's put it like that.

So my take-away is: pay close attention when looking at flyers and in-store promotions.

Yes, and watch out for colours, as well. They sometimes try to catch your eye with a yellow or red price. Is it actually on special? You need to make sure.

Excellent. We've gotten to trap number three.

The third trap is somewhat similar to displays. It's the strategic placement of items in store. Remember that every single item is positioned in such a way as to encourage you to make purchases. It's no accident that baked goods are generally located near the entrance. Their incredible smell stays with you on your way through the store and makes you want to buy more. Also, as creatures of habit, you tend to shop in the same places, get the same kind of bread, the same type of ketchup... so you know exactly where these items are located. You go to the grocery store, walk in, head to the shelves on auto-pilot, especially when you're between those two soccer practices mentioned before, and quickly put what you need in your cart. Retailers have a work-around for this: once in a while, they shuffle the cards by moving certain items. So your ketchup is still available, but maybe not on the same shelf, maybe a little further away, maybe at a different height, which basically forces you to spend more time in store looking for the products you're used to buying. And while you're at it, your attention may be drawn to a new product you've never seen before, or a product you've never thought of

getting before, which takes up even more time. The longer you're there, the more likely you are to put items in your cart. Yet another way they try to get you to buy more. Plus, there's a whole science to placing items on the shelves.

I can imagine. I kind of see it as the forerunner of targeted ads and cookies. They know the type of person who goes to a given section, and how often, to look for a certain product, so they place another equally tempting product in that spot.

By the same token, they don't put sugary cereals with colourful little figures on the top shelf. Coincidentally, they're at the same height as a kid in a parent's cart. Why? Because they attract the attention of children with grabby little fingers. When you shop for groceries, you also tend to notice items at eye level first. But it may be worthwhile to see what's on the upper shelves, the lower shelves, the places you don't usually look. You might find some bargains there. Stay alert, don't just walk in and walk around on auto-pilot.

Wonderful. Duly noted. What about loyalty cards?

Ah, those infamous points cards! We know most people have a few in their wallets. These cards are popular, and with good reason. They feature deals that can be very appealing. I think we've discussed them in other episodes. But remember that they're never completely free, no matter what you're told. There's always a price to pay.

When a product is free, you're the product.

Exactly! You should be aware that, when you have this type of card, you're paying. You're paying in data, in information, so the companies that provide the cards can get to know you as a consumer and present you with customized offers. While these offers can be attractive, they can also be a trap, since they may lead you to buy more. When a company knows your tastes, it can suggest things you'll probably like. You may discover something wonderful, but you may also spend more than you planned. You have to be mindful of this. The corollary is that, in exchange for your data, you'll often receive promotions. It depends on the program. Some give cash refunds, some let you accumulate cash to use toward your next

grocery order, and others allow you to buy gifts from an online store. You have to calculate if the rewards are worthwhile. Another offer we're seeing more now than we used to is instant discounts, i.e. not points you rack up over time. If you walk down the aisles, you'll see an increasing amount of items with incredibly low prices labelled "member price."

Getting back to flyers for a minute, you can see them there too. There's often an item that makes you think, "Wow, what a great deal," but then states in small type that it's for holders of card X.

That's right. While it may be appealing to members, it's much less so to non-members. And again, if you look too quickly, you may get the impression that the item is on sale, when it's only on sale for those with the loyalty card. No loyalty card, no discount. So the price may not be as clear as it seems.

Also, if you go to a grocery store where you don't usually shop and you're not sure you'll go back, you have to think about whether or not you want to get the card for that one order, because they usually offer it to you at checkout.

Absolutely.

All this to say that there is, in fact, a cost. When they tell you it's free, remember that it's not entirely so.

Exactly. Plus, there's a choice you have to make on an individual basis: do you think your personal data is worth the discounts or promotions you're offered? It is for some people, and that's fine.

And does personal data include all the information on people's cell phones, or just the information collected by the app?

Just the information collected by the app, which means your buying habits that allow for the creation of your consumer profile. The profile of a young single man isn't the same as that of a single mother, so they wouldn't have the same buying habits, and they wouldn't necessarily be offered the same products and discounts.

I understand.

It does allow the company to customize more effectively. Obviously, a young single man wouldn't be interested in a discount on diapers, whereas a single mother with infants might appreciate it, so it depends. I'm not saying that it's necessarily bad, just that you have to be aware of the implications. And you also have to know that these discounts can be immediate, longer term or a combination of the two, i.e., you get a discount right now, because broccoli is on sale for members, for example, and you also accumulate points for later. Sometimes, there are promotions in flyers that have nothing to do with the price, only the points. It's quite funny when you see items with no price, just the amount of points you earn for buying them. For instance, you see that you get 50 points for buying a certain kind of yogurt, but you have no idea what the yogurt costs. This tells you just how much attention some people pay to these points, and how important they are to them.

For sure. Next up is shrinkflation. If I'm not mistaken, it was the topic of the first podcast we recorded together since I began my career as host of *Les petits caractères*.

It's quite possible. Shrinkflation is something that has become widespread. It's not a new phenomenon. Option consommateurs conducted research on it in 2013. It wasn't called shrinkflation back then, but rather undersizing. The term shrinkflation didn't even exist at that point.

So you were ahead of your time.

The phenomenon already existed, but was much more subtle. Now it's everywhere. What is shrinkflation? It's a business strategy designed to subtly reduce the product format without changing the price. This means, for example, that the pot of yogurt you buy for \$4 now contains 650 grams instead of 750 grams, making the price per unit of measure the best way to determine whether or not it shrunk. It's a bit of a transparency problem. I don't know how many people are aware of the number of grams in their box of cereal or their bag of cookies.

Probably not many. Even for products I buy every time I go grocery shopping, I couldn't tell you how many milligrams they contain.

And that's perfectly normal. Even more so because there's no standard in Canada, except for certain products, like dairy, which are sold according to... actually, not all dairy. Milk is sold by the litre, but cream, for instance, has decreased in format.

So when the milk cartons look pretty big next to the juice cartons, it's because there's been some shrinkflation in the juice industry, right?

Orange juice, I think, is one of the shrinkflation classics. I'm old enough to remember buying 2 litres, which was reduced to 1.89 litres, then went to 1.75 litres, and is now more like 1.5 litres.

Really?

Maybe you see the impact over time.

I guess. What I noticed recently was chocolate bars. It wasn't long after we did the episode on shrinkflation, actually. There was a big stand with chocolate bars that were all on sale, really cheap, so everyone would want to buy a couple, but I'd eaten enough chocolate in my life to know that the format had shrunk. I thought, "Not crazy, I'll get some now because they're incredibly cheap and I'll get used to this format."

Yes, and it's done in different ways. They may reduce the format without fanfare so people don't notice unless they've got a very sharp eye.

Or they've eaten a lot of chocolate in their lives.

Exactly. Now, you have to know that this isn't illegal.

That's what I find a bit frustrating. I understand that companies need to be viable, that's not at all what I'm questioning, but I tell myself that shrinkflation has to stop at a certain point. There won't be anything left of the products if it continues.

And it has a perverse effect on some products. It can make them taxable when they weren't before. For example, if you buy a box of six granola bars, a product that isn't considered as having to be consumed immediately, it isn't taxable. But if there are only five granola bars in the box, it becomes taxable.

I didn't know that.

There are some products like that. Same thing for ice cream. I believe the threshold is 500 mL. Some high-end ice creams have gone below the threshold, not by much, say to 475 mL. So not only are you paying more per 100 mL, but now tax is being tacked on. It's not illegal as such, and companies have no choice but to charge tax, those are the taxation rules, and it's not up to me to question it.

But it's good to know as a consumer. And if we sometimes feel certain companies are overusing this strategy, it may be better to buy from another company if possible.

And that's when you can get totally lost. Like I was saying, there's no standard format, and there can even be several formats within the same brand. I'm thinking of cookie bags and cereal boxes here. Different flavours can have a different number of grams in the package. So when they shrink the format, you don't necessarily realize it, and it also becomes difficult to compare, because you haven't memorized the size of the box, the numbers aren't always round and you don't remember how many grams there were. The most effective tool to get the best value is the one mentioned earlier. The price per unit of measure allows you to see the price per 100 grams and find out which product is cheapest. Is it the product you prefer? That's another question, but at least you can try to get the most for your money. The problem with shrinkflation is the lack of transparency, and I think that's what makes people mad. It's okay that your cookies cost more when it costs more to make them. People can understand that. But it gets a little frustrating when you sit there and tell yourself, "Every time I buy a box, it seems there are one or two fewer cookies." This makes people feel like they're being taken for idiots, and that really irks them. We at Option consommateurs are requesting better shrinkflation management. Not necessarily to prevent it, but to make notification more transparent by requiring that consumers be advised when formats are reduced. Measures like this were taken in France, among other places, with the express goal of making shrinkflation more transparent. It'll be interesting to see the long-term repercussions. Unfortunately, shrinkflation can also have a

ripple effect. When one company starts to shrink its products, competitors often follow, even store brands, but they're usually the last. So yes, your best tool is the price per unit of measure, as well as your watchfulness. I know it's not realistic for you to remember all the formats of all the products you buy, but it may be a good idea to try to remember the formats of the products you buy most often.

Stay on the lookout for other options.

Definitely. In fact, there's a good series of articles by Radio-Canada, and a website that lists some of the products that have been shrinkflated. It can be helpful for people who want to watch the trends.

Absolutely. Thank you, Sylvie. And last but not least is skimpflation.

Skimpflation is a strategy designed to reduce the quality of the products you buy. The products cost less to make, but are still sold for the same price. Skimpflation can also be applied to customer service, so you may have people who go to certain stores and think, "That's funny, employees are becoming increasingly scarce around here." It's a means to cut back on service, as well.

I thought you were going to say "they're becoming increasingly hostile around here."

(laughing)

It can happen, but that's a whole other story. There are less services offered. In some grocery stores, there won't be any baggers or other types of staff. There may be self-checkout machines, so no one at checkout. You have to scan your own items and bag them. These are all measures that have been taken. They allow companies to lower their labour costs. I know some companies say it has solved another problem too: the labour shortage.

Yes, and it's no secret that technology will be crucial in bringing production up to a level that will keep prices down.

For sure, but the fact still remains that you're getting less services for the same price or more. And you'll see it in foods, as well.

Manufacturers may very subtly change the ingredient list. For

example, a cookie made with butter may be made with cheaper vegetable oil instead. In some cases, this can affect the taste or the texture. In some cases, you may not see any difference. It depends on the sensitivity of your palate. But it can be a slippery slope for manufacturers. How much can they reduce the quality before consumers notice and switch to a competitive product with higher quality? Again, it's very subtle, because you're not aware and, as mentioned before, you can't remember the weight and size of the products you buy, let alone the ingredient list. It becomes a real puzzle.

A full-time job.

Exactly. It's something you don't often realize, and as long as the ingredient list is still accurate, there's no false representation. Just like it's not illegal to remove 50 grams from a product as long as the unit or weight is still accurate. If the right price is shown, there's currently no requirement to put a little star next to it and say, "Attention! We've reduced the weight by 50 grams."

So these are traps for consumers.

Right. Again, very subtle issues and problems with transparency that lead you to ask, "Do I have all the information I need as a consumer?" It's really hard. Some products have been completely changed. I'm thinking back to an article written about a year ago by Marie-Eve Fournier of *La Presse*. She exposed the fact that there was no longer any real white chocolate in White Chocolate Chipits. They were actually made of chocolate-flavoured cream. But it was glossed over.

It took Marie-Eve Fournier to show us the way. Thank you, Marie-Eve.

As long as you don't notice, it happens right under your nose, and at the end of the day, you wind up paying more for a product of lesser quality. It's maddening for consumers.

Very true. I understand why people feel helpless and frustrated, but I think just talking about it, like Marie-Eve did in her article, must send a message to manufacturers that consumers really do pay attention to what's going on with the products they buy at the grocery store.

Definitely. So none of these tactics are necessarily illegal right now. The real issue is transparency. But the big problem is that the best weapon consumers currently have to fight these tactics is watchfulness. It's great to be vigilant, but at a certain point, you can't...

You don't want to be in hyper-vigilance mode when you do the grocery shopping.

Absolutely not. It becomes exhausting and infuriating. But there are some tools you can use the next time you go to the grocery store. I know we've already mentioned these in other episodes, but I'll remind you again. Create a budget. Knowing how much you have to spend and setting limits before you even get to the store is a first step. Make a good old time-tested grocery list. I know it's a granny trick, but it works. The idea is to base your list on what you already have at home and avoid waste as much as possible. Complement what's in your kitchen with items that are preferably on sale—really on sale—and adjust your menu in advance. Try to arrange your menu around specials. So if you have a huge craving for shepherd's pie, but chicken is on sale this week, you might want to switch it up, make a minor change in the game plan. Cook your own meals. It's a well-known way to save money. And home-made meals are often healthier, with less salt and fat. Ready-to-eat meals can help out in a pinch, but convenience comes at a cost.

A cost to your wallet and your health.

Yes, so cook. Cook meals in advance if you have the room to store them. Why not prepare smaller dishes, in portions that can be frozen? It makes for easily transportable lunches, and saves money too. Vary your ingredients. People already do this, but there are sometimes cheaper substitutes. Legume and tofu products can be used as alternatives to certain proteins that are much more expensive. I'm not saying everyone should become a vegetarian, but this allows you to change cuisines, change flavours, and make dishes that are healthy, delicious and less costly because they maximize sale prices. One mistake everyone admittedly makes from time to time is going to buy groceries on an empty stomach. It's one of the deadly sins of grocery

shopping. It leads to more impulse purchases, and not in the broccoli aisle, but in the high-cal aisle. Be very mindful of this. We've given you these tips before, but it doesn't hurt to repeat them, because they can help you avoid some of the traps we discussed. Incidentally, going back to the grocery list for a moment, it's one thing to make it, but it's another to stick to it, since it can sometimes be a weak spot. So make your list as complete as possible and try to hold steadfast. You'll see it's a great way to save money.

Positively. Thanks so much, Sylvie. And to those of you at home, thank you for watching our podcast. If you want more resources for grocery store traps, there are several on the Option consommateurs website. The site will also feature a cheat sheet on the traps we discussed today. Have a wonderful day or evening, and see you again soon!