

INDEPENDENT VIEW

MYSTERY SHOP

Independents have a good crack at Easter

At this time of year it's all about the eggs and bunnies. All but one of the stores surveyed in this month's mystery shop stocked a good range of Easter products, Nick Hughes reports

With the multiples selling Easter eggs at eye-wateringly low prices, smaller stores could be forgiven for exercising caution over stock levels this Easter. But on the whole, the availability of Easter items was good across the stores, even the independents.

Lidl and Somerfield were predictably strong on price, heavily discounting Easter eggs in line with the multiples. The cheapest egg in both stores was £1, with Lidl also providing the cheapest hot cross buns at 79p for four.

Spar catered for both ends of the Easter egg market, price-matching the multiples with £1 eggs, but also offering £9.99 premium eggs. AH Convenience Store concentrated its offer on the value end of the market with a large variety of big brand eggs under £5.

The store didn't, however, stock premium-end Easter eggs. Joint owner Zahfran Hussain says he took waste into account when choosing his stock. "Since Easter eggs are seasonal products, we only buy the ones that really sell and they are the ones priced under £5."

As Easter approaches he intends to generate more sales by displaying Easter eggs next to the counter to improve visibility.

There has been talk that independents could resort to purchasing Easter eggs from the grey market in light of the difficult financial climate. But Hussain insists that his business will continue to only source from reputable suppliers. "All of our eggs are brought from our local cash & carry. We don't buy products from representatives who come in to visit us until we know they are reputable. Nowadays you need to be really careful, especially as there are so many duplicates on the market."

The only indie not to get into the Easter spirit was The Convenience Store, which failed to stock any of the items on the list

PRICE & SERVICE COMPARISON

10 CONVENIENCE PRODUCTS

	SPAR	LIDL	SOMERFIELD	THE CONVENIENCE STORE	AH CONVENIENCE STORE
Sliced white bread 800g, cheapest brand	1.00	0.40	0.72	1.20	1.15
Milk 1 pint, semi-skimmed	0.48	0.42 ¹	0.46	OOS	0.65
Banana	0.16	0.18	0.20	DNS	0.20
Painkiller 8-pk, cheapest brand	0.29	0.19	0.29	0.29	0.69
Coke or cheapest cola, 500ml	1.00	0.29	0.99	0.55	0.60
Walkers crisps cheapest brand, standard packet	0.42	DNS	OOS	0.42	0.40
Water cheapest water, 500ml	0.85	0.27 ²	0.47	0.39	0.85
Mars bar standard	0.44	OOS	0.49	0.50	0.45
Filter coffee 227g packet, cheapest	2.79	2.19	2.75	2.99	DNS
Catfood Whiskas pouch or cheapest brand	0.42	0.20	0.38	DNS	0.45
TOTAL	£9.49	£5.49	£6.75	£6.34	£5.44

EASTER PRODUCTS – 1 = point for each stocked

	1	1	1	0	1
Standard Easter egg under £5	1	1	1	0	1
Premium Easter egg above £5	1	1	1	0	0
Easter bunny any brand	0	1	1	0	0
Hot cross buns	1	1	1	0	1
Free-range eggs	1	1	1	0	1

CUSTOMER SERVICE – 1 = good 0 = below average

	1	0	0	0	1
Courteous	1	0	0	0	1
Knowledgeable	0	0	1	0	1
General helpfulness	1	0	1	0	1
Standard of dress	1	1	1	0	1
Personal hygiene	1	1	1	0	1

SERVICES – 1 = good 0 = below average

	1	1	1	1	1
Cash/billpay	1	1	1	1	1
Lottery/bingo	1	0	1	1	1
Communication top-up/post office	1	0	1	0	1
Administrative fax, photocopying, email or collection	0	0	0	0	0
Fresh food barbecue, deli, local produce, bakery, coffee	1	0	1	0	0

COMMUNITY – 1 = good 0 = below average

	1	1	1	1	1
Bus stop/local service	1	1	1	1	1
Local events advertised	0	0	0	0	1
Personal adverts advertised	0	0	0	0	1
Charity collection boxes	0	0	0	0	1
Locally made products and/or loyalty card scheme	1	0	1	0	0
TOTAL	14	9	15	3	15

Notes: 1. Two pints for 84p 2. Multipack of six for £1.94 DNS = did not stock; OOS = out of stock



Hot cross buns are a must-stock item for any grocer this Easter, if the statistics are to be believed. In January, The Grocer reported that just three weeks on from Christmas, supermarkets were already experiencing an early run on hot cross buns as consumers sought an affordable winter treat. Morrisons said sales were almost double those of last year, while Tesco reported sales up 17.6% year-on-year.

Spar

Address: Watford Road, Birmingham
Time & date: 9 March at 9.30am
 This store was busy when our shopper visited, though staff still found time to greet her. Shelf-edge labels were clearly displayed and the Easter egg section was particularly well merchandised, with price promotions clearly visible. Staff were helpful and courteous when asked for help with locating products. Overall this was an enjoyable shop.

Lidl

Address: Silver Street, Kings Heath, Birmingham
Time & date: 9 March at 10.30am
 This Lidl store boasted its own car park, but charged for parking. The store layout confused our shopper who also struggled to identify the price of products due to some unclear labelling and high stacking of products. There were no staff on hand to ask for assistance. Only one person was serving at the checkout, resulting in a wait of several minutes, for which the cashier apologised.

Somerfield

Address: Yardley Wood Road, Birmingham
Time & date: 9 March at 1.15pm
 This large Somerfield store was located in a residential area with free parking at the side and the front. The store was clean and products on the list were easy to find. There were plenty of staff members on the shop floor, many of whom were busy stacking shelves. The checkout assistant was polite and efficient.

The Convenience Store

Address: Clay Lane, Birmingham
Time & date: 9 March at 13.15pm
 The Convenience Store in Clay Lane was anything but. The store was low on stock, while aisles were narrow and difficult to navigate and merchandising was poor. Our shopper found it difficult to locate what she was looking for. There were no Easter eggs on display. The solitary staff member said that the store didn't stock them and then proceeded to have a phone conversation while serving our shopper.

AH Convenience Store

Address: Solihull Lane, Birmingham
Time & date: 9 March at 2.30pm
 This had the feel of a community store, with calling cards and local advertisements clearly displayed. Our shopper was greeted with a smile from the smartly dressed sales assistant. Products on the shopping list were easy to find, while shelves were well stocked, neatly presented and well labelled. Staff were on hand to point our shopper in the direction of products, while Easter eggs were well merchandised and competitively priced.



STORE FACTS
Address: Solihull Lane, Birmingham
Owners: Zahfran Hussain and Ikhlam Ahmed
Tenure: three years
How do you feel about the mystery shop? It's good to be a winner. We have worked so hard to make this a store people want to visit. This will help us keep motivated.

INTERVIEW: MR AHMED & MR HUSSAIN, OWNERS, AH CONVENIENCE STORE

How closely do you follow trends in the grocery industry, new products and services?
 We read a selection of magazines and also receive advice from our suppliers, who let us know what the current trends are.

Who are your key suppliers and how often do you receive deliveries?

Our key suppliers are Bestway; Fred Steele, a Birmingham-based confectionery wholesaler; and Maini Cash & Carry, a specialist in licensed categories. We have deliveries pretty much every day, and have kept the same suppliers since we started out.

Who are your local competitors?

Our nearest competitor is around two miles away, which is why we chose this location. No other businesses have opened while we have been here.

How will the mix of products and services change in the next 12 months?

We want to look into local produce and having a deli in store, but slowly does it. We're still establishing the store in the community.

What is the worst thing to have happened to your business in the past 12 months?

Nothing really bad has happened. We have cameras in this shop, which we monitor all the time, so theft is not a huge problem here.

What is the most successful new innovation or service you have introduced in the past year?

The new lottery machine is our greatest achievement. We are always thinking of innovative ways to improve the business, but for the moment the store will remain as it is, due to the current economic situation.

How do you feel about the future? Do you think your business will be bigger or smaller next year?

We are confident about the future. We do want to expand

the business in the long term. We would like a chain of shops once we have the right strategy in place.

How do you feel about the proposal to restrict cigarette sales to the counter?

We think it will be difficult, as customers will not be able to see what is available to buy. But if the Government goes ahead with the legislation, then we will adhere to it.

How is the Easter trade building?

It is brilliant. We tend to buy cheaper Easter Eggs, as this is what will sell here. I know some stores do not stock them, but they should follow the trends. It's a big selling opportunity for us.

How much does the average shopper spend on Easter eggs?

I'd estimate about £2.50 per egg. We haven't done any proper calculations, but we know from talking to our customers that this is the kind of price they are happy to pay.