

THE SHELF WHERE EVERYTHING IS HALF OFF

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By Kayla Levy

There are many places to begin a shopping trip at the Coop. Some people beeline for the produce section or go straight to the bulk aisle. Others begin filling up a cart at the meat freezer. Others still walk directly back to the end of aisle four, where there's a shelf—called an endcap in the shopping business—full of discounted goods.

“I've had a lot of shoppers tell me this is the first thing they look at when they come into the Coop,” said Receiving Coordinator Gillian Chi. “When I stock the sale endcap, people come and grab items before I even put the price label up.” Chi would know, as she is the one who started—and is responsible for maintaining—the sale endcap, where all items are half off.

It all began with an email. In 2021, Chi received a message from KeHE, one of the Coop's main distributors, with a spreadsheet highlighting hundreds of half-off items. The cost of groceries was skyrocketing, and Chi thought the discounts would benefit shoppers, so she placed an order for an endcap's worth of items (the end of aisle four had just been cleared of extra supplements). Everything sold quickly.



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“I called my sales rep to understand why she sent the discounted list in the first place, and she said, ‘Oh, we have one every week,’” said Chi, recalling her surprise. “I asked her to start sending it to me weekly.” From there, the sale endcap was born.

Every week, Chi receives the half-off list via email and sorts through to find about 20 items to purchase. She starts by removing frozen or refrigerated goods, as well as anything with artificial ingredients or an expiration date less than three months away. From there, she’s left with about 100 products.

“It’s a gamble, but I’ve gotten pretty experienced at having a gut feeling about what people will buy,” said Chi.

She typically buys 200 units of each product (the most that can fit in the basement), hoping the supply will last a week—but that rarely happens. Turnover on the endcap is quicker than in other parts of the store, and there are fewer items in backstock, Chi

explained. Chips and chocolate are usually the first to go, she said.

Coop member Robert Berkman shops the sale endcap all the time but is disappointed when items sell out. “The only problem is buying something really good and then going back and they’re all gone. Forever,” he said.

Other members said they have a hard time finding predictable products or flavors they like on the endcap. “I’ve mostly found unusual snacks there,” said Sophie Pugh-Sellers.

In some cases, sale items are products that exist elsewhere in the store or are staple goods. Once, Coop member Mo Christ discovered a shelf-stable curry from the endcap that they now purchase at full price. “It’s a perfect office lunch,” they said.

For her part, Chi tries to stock the shelf with pantry staples when possible. “The other items are impulse purchases, but buying a pantry staple makes me feel good because it’s a chance for shoppers to save money on an item they’d be buying anyway,” she said.



One member noted that the best item they'd ever bought on the endcap was a Graza olive oil refill for just \$9.

The endcap at aisle four isn't the only place where shoppers can find sales in the Coop. When the Coop gets an extreme deal from KeHE or another distributor, the team tends to put it elsewhere on the floor—like in shopping carts with a special sign.

Distributors regularly put products on sale from 10% to 25% off for the month, and the Coop passes those savings along, but unless you're someone who buys the same item regularly or closely tracks your receipt, you might miss them. "We have no way of indicating that on the shelf, so it's kind of like a hidden sale," said Chi.

In recent months, bolstered by continuing demand, the discount initiative has expanded into the side of aisle four. Chi tries to divide products, putting non-edible goods next to the supplements, and edible treats on the endcap itself. "It's a very random selection, but it's fun," she said.

“This week we have noni juice. I’d never heard of it before, but we’ve almost run out.”

Kayla Levy is a freelance contributor covering housing and culture for New York Magazine. She’s been a Coop member since 2019.