

## Being Paid to Eat Pizza: Negative Prices in Supermarkets

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Some supermarkets in the UK (specifically Waitrose and Somerfield that I've noticed) occasionally have items with negative prices. I'd be interested to hear of other places where this happens and of more dramatic examples than I have seen. I'd also be interested to hear of places where this has been prevented, and how, and of possible amusing side-effects of the prevention.

Here is an extract from a receipt from my local branch of Waitrose (on 28/11/13):

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WR PIRI PIRI HOUMOUS 29p
WR TOMATO HOUMOUS 29p
** WR HOUMOUS 2 for £3 ** -0.70
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We see that I am charged 29p each for two tubs of houmous, then 70p is taken off because there is a “2 for £3” offer on houmous. As a result, I am paid 12p to take 2 tubs of houmous away. I spell it this way because the receipt does.

The first time I noticed this I bought 2 pizzas for 10p each and since they were “2 for 1” the receipt had 1 pound off. Result: I was paid 80p to take two frozen mushroom pizzas away.

It may seem that the above calculations make no sense. The “because” and “since” don't work. What is actually happening is that the items in question were discounted because they had reached their “sell-by” date, and they were also in “2 for 1” or “2 for £x” type offers. The way the offers are processed seems to be that if pizza is £1 and there is a 2-for-1 offer on it, you get £1 subtracted from your bill if you buy two pizzas. Similarly, if houmous is £1.85 but there is a “2 for £3” offer, when you buy two tubs 70p is taken off because the normal price of two tubs of houmous would have been £3.70. These amounts are subtracted even if the base price of the items has changed.

I have never dared to purchase only negatively priced items on a trip to the supermarket, but I have received email from someone who says he tried this and he was given his goods and some money at the checkout. I shall try this with an automated checkout rather than a staffed one the next chance I get and see what it does.

A possible new source of confusion is loyalty cards. The Waitrose card, for example, gives 10% off some items. I am keen to see how this combines with combo offers, discounts due to “sell by date” arrival or indeed both together. It could be that I get 10% off a negative price, in which case I would be best advised to go to the checkout once for positively priced items and once for negatively priced items, not using my loyalty card on the second visit. Or it could be that the 10% discount will apply to the undiscounted price. Considering how discounts seem to work in general, I think the last possibility is the most likely. Between getting my card and G4G11 no research opportunity has presented itself.

It seems unlikely that any of this matters. The quantities involved are always very small, and it may well not be worth a programmer spending any time at all “fixing” this. It may even be that it's cheaper for the supermarket to pay me 40p to remove a pizza instead of having staff throw it away 30 minutes later. It could be that I am being allowed to think I am getting away with something to encourage me to visit the supermarket and buy other things. I'd love to hear from someone with solid info on this.

Coupons less simple than “40p off” might also interact in surprising ways with all the above.