



Extension News Column

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Re: Pinching Pennies column

Have you noticed there is less peanut butter in the jar? Coffee, ice cream and tuna have all succumbed to the shrinking package in your grocery store.

Many of us noticed when the 3-pound coffee can started shrinking. It is now 39 ounces, which is actually just over 2 ½ pounds. The can looks the same, but the weight of the product has gone down. Has the price gone down? No, the price remains the same. During the holidays, I thought I was getting a great deal on sugar. But when I got it home, I discovered that I had only 4 pounds, not the 5 pounds I thought.

Check out these changes in the weight of containers:

- Ice cream has gone from 2 quarts to 1.75 quarts with some brands going to 1.5 quarts.
- Tuna has changed from 8-ounce cans to 5-ounce bags.
- Cereal has gone down from 14.5 ounces to 12.1 ounces.
- Individual-sized yogurts are now 6 ounces (some as low as 4 ounces) from the old 8-ounce containers.
- Peanut butter is now 14.1 ounces instead of 16 ounces.
- Sugar is packaged in 4-pound instead of 5-pound sacks.
- The Plenty Pack of gum has been reduced from 17 sticks to 15 sticks.

All these changes in weights account for a shrinkage value of between 10 and 30 percent.

So, how do they do it? The packages look the same, but are slightly smaller. Turn your peanut butter jar over. The new jars have an indentation in the bottom about ½ an inch deep. This indentation allows for less product in the jar. The cereal boxes are the same width, but are not as thick as the old ones, which allows for only 12 ounces instead of the old box of 14 ounces.

All these products are getting smaller. But the real problem is that you are buying less, but not paying less. The prices of these products have remained the same. Reducing the size is one way that manufacturers can cope with soaring prices.

In the manufacturers' defense, this is the least of three evils. As prices of raw materials, shipping and production have gone up, the manufacturers had to make some adjustments. They could reduce the quality of ingredients, increase the cost of products on the shelf or reduce the weight of the product you get in the jar. We have come to expect that our products taste a certain way and changing the ingredients would result in a product we might not like. Customers would surely rebel about the increase in price for their favorite products. This move is probably the least problematic solution to increasing costs.

As consumers, what are our options? The first step is to read the labels. Know exactly how much you are buying. It also gives you an opportunity to jump on the deals if one item has more product for the same amount of money. You also might want to carry a small calculator to the store to help you sort out all the price differences. Most of us have trouble doing the math to keep up with the difference between a 14-ounce jar of peanut butter at \$3.69 and a 60-ounce jar at \$9.99. The unit pricing tags on the shelves can help, but they don't always use the same unit size. Some are listed as cost per ounce, some as cost per pound or even price per container. Using a calculator will allow you to compare prices accurately.

In addition, be sure to use a spatula to get the last of that peanut butter out of the jar. The indentation in the bottom of the jar makes it harder to get all the product out of the jar. How much irritation value does that add to your day?

Be sure to know what you are buying and to use every bit out of the jar to get the most for your money.

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