Try it before you buy it

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Armed with a cup of Starbucks coffee and a fistful of compact discs, Kim Finley sampled her way through the music department recently at Barnes and Noble Booksellers in West Des Moines.

Finley was able to hear 30 seconds of every track on the Harry Connick Jr., Alison Krauss, Charlotte Church and Rosemary Clooney CDs she was considering buying by scanning the bar code into one of the store's 33 listening centers and donning headphones.

"I've never taken the time to do this before," said Finley, who lives in Des Moines. "But things are so expensive these days that I'd rather make sure I can get what I want."

Customer sampling is growing in popularity as savvy shoppers demand to know more about what they are buying and sellers battle to differentiate themselves among the throngs of vendors offering similar products.

For decades, people have test driven cars, sprayed perfume at cosmetic counters and received laundry soap samples in the mail, all in the name of marketing.

With customer expectations high and budgets tight, people expect a preview.

"Sampling has been around a long time, and if people are smart, they are using it," said Kay Palan, associate professor of marketing at Iowa State University. "It's a way for people to get over the hump of uncertainty and risk, especially when it comes to things that are expensive."

Grocery stores, which have long participated in sampling, are doing it more extensively and more often now, said Maggie McCuen, branch manager of Food Demos USA in Des Moines. That company employs about 2,500 people in Iowa and surrounding states.

"Sampling can easily triple sales of an item or sell it out completely," McCuen said.

Consumer habits aren't easily swayed unless there is something to lure them to try new things, she said. "Usually people will stay with what they know."

Sam's Club in Windsor Heights routinely offers samples of a variety of foods and other products, mostly on the weekends when the store is at its busiest. Crowds of hungry and curious shoppers mill around sample tables as clerks pull steaming food from toaster ovens before dicing it into bite-sized pieces.

"Our sampling gives people an opportunity to try something they wouldn't normally buy," Sam's Club general manager Carl Fitzgerald said. On any given Saturday or Sunday, store sample clerks posted at the ends of aisles dish out pieces of egg roll on toothpicks, marinated chicken, chocolate eclairs, muffins, pie and other products the store sells in bulk.

People are hesitant to spend $8 to $10 on a product they've not tried before in fear they will dislike it, Fitzgerald said. Sampling is a good way for them to get to try new items, he said.

Sam's, which is owned by Wal-Mart Inc., doesn't do much advertising, so sampling also is a means of letting customers know about some of its products, Fitzgerald said.

Hy-Vee has been using sampling to entice customers for as long as the store chain has been open, about 73 years, spokeswoman Ruth Mitchell said.

The amount of sampling is up to individual store managers, she said. Most do silent sampling, which is setting out a product, like fruit or cheese chunks, that customers can sample on their own.
In addition, some stores have product demonstrations in which clerks prepare samples and give them to customers along with information like cooking times, prices and nutritional facts.

"Because there are so many more products available for customers, sampling is a good way for people to see a new item," Mitchell said. It also causes people to linger in the store, sometimes resulting in a larger sales receipt, she said.

Dahl's grocery stores do some sampling, but it varies from store to store, officials said.

Pat Childress, manager of the Dahl's on Fleur Drive, said because remodeling of his store is now complete, he hopes to double the amount of sampling. The store is flooded with a variety of new items twice a year and sampling is a way to get them out in front of shoppers, he said.

Often, vendors selling the items will give the stores a case or two for sampling and provide a clerk to do the work, he said. Other times, the store will foot the bill and provide the sampler, he said.

The downside can be congested aisles and interrupted traffic flow during peak shopping times, he said.

Sampling is moving outside of the grocery stores, too.

Barnes and Noble began offering samples of its musical selections at its West Des Moines location about a year ago, said Molly Olinger, community relations manager.

"We have had a very favorable response," she said.

Barnes and Noble does not disclose specific financial information, but Olinger said music sales grew last year, in part due to sampling. Scanning is especially popular with new releases, she said.

"It's definitely a marketing tool to get people to hear some things they may not have thought of to buy," she said.

Customer Rob Meade said he likes the scanning feature that allows people to search for a CD by an artist's name or by album name. The longer customers stay in the store listening to music, the more likely they are to buy something, he said.

Restaurants also offer samples of food and drink to draw in diners. Panera Bread often provides pieces of bread and bagels for customers.

Rock Bottom Restaurant and Brewery in West Des Moines gives patrons samples of the beer it brews.

Customers can tap into a tall glass tube of beer to sip on while they wait for a table. Rock Bottom also offers first-time diners a sample platter with small glasses of each of its beers—a light lager, a pale ale, a red ale, a brown ale and a dry stout.

The sampling "gives customers a chance to discover something new," master brewer Paul Kurtzfeldt said.

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GRAPHIC: By: DAVID PETERSON, REGISTER PHOTOS: Cheers: Eric Larsen of Kansas City samples one of several different kinds of beer brewed at the Rock Bottom Restaurant and Brewery in West Des Moines. Larsen, who works for an advertising agency, was in town on business. Getting in tune with consumers: Barnes and Noble employee Molly Olinger demonstrates how customers can sample music by scanning a CD.