

SAME CART DIFFERENT PRICE

Instacart's Price Experiments

Consumer Reports | Groundwork Collaborative | More Perfect Union

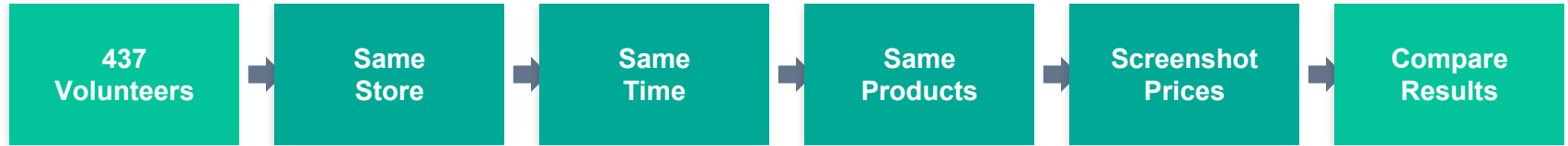
Eric Gardner, More Perfect Union | Grace Gedy, Consumer Reports

UNCTAD Working Group on Consumer Protection in E-Commerce
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QUESTION: DOES INSTACART CHARGE DIFFERENT PEOPLE, DIFFERENT AMOUNTS, FOR THE SAME ITEMS, AT THE SAME STORE?

Instacart acquired Eversight an AI testing company in 2022
Evidence of similar behavior towards workers

METHODOLOGY: MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE



THE APPROACH:

- 437 volunteers across U.S. (CR members + MPU community)
- 5 controlled experiments (September 2025)
- Synchronized shopping: same store, same time, identical baskets (18-20 items)
- Participants took screenshots but did NOT purchase
- ~200 complete submissions accepted

RETAILERS TESTED:

Primary:
Safeway (3 locations), Target (2 locations)

FOUR MAJOR FINDINGS

1 SYSTEMATIC DISCRIMINATION

74% of products had multiple prices
Up to 5 different prices simultaneously

Examples:

- Eggs: \$3.99, \$4.28, \$4.59, \$4.69, \$4.79 (20%)
- Store Brand Corn Flakes: \$2.99, \$3.49, \$3.69 (23%)

2 PRICE BUCKETING

Shoppers sorted into 4-8 tiers per store
Identical item pricing within each tier

3 FICTITIOUS PRICING

Same sale price, different 'original' prices
Example: Saltines \$3.99 for everyone
But 'originally' \$5.93, \$5.99, OR \$6.69

4 CUMULATIVE IMPACT

Average basket variation: ~7%
92% of shoppers paid MORE than lowest price
Annual projection: \$1,200 per household

EXAMPLE OF PRICE GROUPS



"RANDOM" TESTING VS. PATENT PORTFOLIO

WHAT INSTACART SAYS:

*"Customers are **randomly assigned** to price test cohorts by product category and location"*

*"These tests **do not use any personal or demographic data**"*

*"We **do not** use customer characteristics"*

WHAT INSTACART/EVERSIGHT PATENTS DESCRIBE:

Patent Portfolio explicitly references:

- Purchase history
- Buying behavior
- Demographics: age, gender, household size, income
- "New-to-brand" status
- Grouping customers into "subpopulations"
- Product and Shopper Headroom

ADDITIONAL:

- Data obtained from Acxiom & Epsilon (major data brokers)
- Brands can use "behavioral data" for targeted offers

Instacart's explanation: *Patents use "overly broad language to preserve optionality"*

WHAT INSTACART SAYS VS. WHAT WE FOUND

INSTACART CLAIMS	OUR FINDINGS
"Retail partners control prices"	Instacart scrapes Target, runs own tests
"Only 10 retail partners"	Found at Target (no partnership) + Partners make up large share of grocery market in US
"Most see standard price"	92% paid more than lowest price
"Changes are negligible"	\$1,200/year potential impact Smart rounding was 10%+ differences

After our inquiry: Instacart ended experiments

EXPANSION TO PHYSICAL STORES?

WHAT WE FOUND:

- Instacart deploying "Carrot Tags" (electronic shelf labels)
- Enables instant remote price changes at the shelf set by pricing software
- Patent describing expansive in-store price testing methodology across store networks through ESLs

WHAT HAPPENED:

- 1 We asked if Carrot Tags used for price testing
- 2 Instacart: "*not currently integrated*"
- 3 Website language **deleted** shortly after our inquiry

Before

Here's how Carrot Tags can take your aisles into the future



Pick to Light

Instacart Shoppers and store associates can select an item on the Instacart Shopper app and the corresponding shelf label will flash—like magic, driving order found-rate improvements.



Interactive Content

Customers can scan a QR code linking to curated content to learn more about an item, including whether it's eligible for EBT SNAP, or save a recipe to their online profile.



Dynamic Attributes

Carrot Tags can display key attribute information, including dietaries, merchandising or certifications so customers always know what they're purchasing.



Price Optimization with Oversight

Fully unlock the potential of ESLs' instant and accurate pricing changes with dynamic

Partner with us to drive proven results.

Request a demo

After

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