



BYU students enjoying free pizza during homecoming week 2024.

Feelings About Freebies

The Study of How Free Products Influence Behavior of College Students

BY: SYDNEY BACHRACH

Free Food At BYU

Every college student has experienced glancing at their phones with a familiar ache of hunger and no clear plan for their next meal. The struggle is all too real. Between rising tuition, costly textbooks, and growing rent, it can feel like there's never enough money left over for food. Trying to navigate these financial pressures can be overwhelming. Balancing classes, part-time jobs, and extracurriculars adds to the stress of being a college student. Many are forced to make tough decisions, often skipping meals just to get by.

However, in 2023 one student, Samuel Haggard, wanted to make a change. He created a GroupMe chat to share information about free food available around campus.

Over the past year, the GroupMe chat has gained over 1900 members. The group chat has become a lifeline as students have worked together in sharing tips and resources to get the word about free food out there.

BYU even produced an article¹ explaining that because of this group chat students have learned more about events going on and even reduced food waste. Students might need a little extra motivation — like free food — to take advantage of resources.

“A fun fact is that a lot of students may need a certain resource or want to go to a certain resource, but unless there is an incentive of free food, they’re probably not going to go.”

-Haggard

Food Necessities

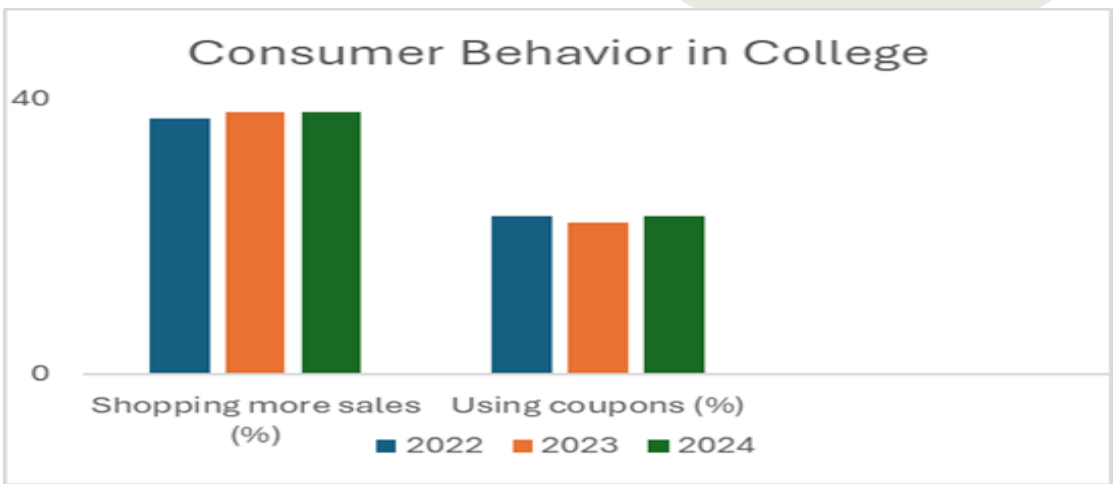
This article aims to explore how free products can shape college students’ behavior and engagement. With increasing inflation, more college students are struggling to pay for the necessities. Wakefield Research², published by Amazon, surveyed 1,000 college students about what they spent the most money on in a typical month.



54% of students’ monthly budget is spent on food!

Additionally, former CEO of Foodservice Results, Darren Tristano³, explained that more than three fifths of college students say low prices are the most important factor when buying food.

To make the data even more sound, statistics from [Prosper Insights & Analytics](#)⁴ explained the consumer behavior of college students in the United States over the past three years. The anchored graphic, located on page two, proves that college students are frugal. They are constantly looking for anything cheap and convenient.



Graphic 1: [Statista.com](https://www.statista.com)

Over the past three years, at least 20% of college students' consumer behavior has been affected by discounts or sales. The research also demonstrates that close to 40% of college consumers actively looked for deals. We can interpret this data to mean that college students are becoming more aware of their financial independence; the students will more likely shop with coupons or during sales. This analysis connects the idea that college students will gravitate toward cheap or free things making the marketing strategy of free food very appealing.

Engagement Opportunities

Free products often evoke a sense of gratification and foster positive brand associations among students. This phenomenon can significantly boost student participation at events, offering valuable marketing insights for businesses and campus organizations.

Understanding the power of free products is essential, but it is equally important to recognize any limitations. Additionally, this article will dive into identifying these pitfalls and provide balanced perspectives.

To fully utilize this marketing approach, businesses and campus groups are encouraged to implement free product campaigns to enhance engagement. This strategy not only drives participation but also builds lasting connections with the student community.

Psychological Impact

Free products can create immediate feelings of satisfaction and foster positive brand connections among college students.

One study published by Emerald Insight⁵ conducted face-to-face interviews to determine how sensory brand experiences (SBEs) impact consumer-brand relationships.

While the article discusses the importance of SBEs, it does not specifically focus on food, but the article emphasizes the role of multisensory cues—including taste—in shaping consumer experiences. This approach is crucial for enhancing customer satisfaction, brand attachment, and emotional connections with brands.



Zha et al. explained that when something is sensed as tasty, receptors embedded in the tongue as well as receptors in your brain collect the information.

The authors highlighted the significance of this mouth/mind relationship by explaining that the pleasures of food reside in the mind and the mouth.

From this study, we can learn that by offering free things such as food, businesses and organizations can create a memorable and pleasurable experience that engages the consumers' sensory receptors and elicits their positive emotions. This strategy not only enhances customer satisfaction but fosters a deeper connection through sensory memories. Good experiences will lead to an increase in positive word-of-mouth among college students.

Offering free food samples creates a lasting psychological effect on consumers, making it a proven and effective marketing strategy.

Attendance

Moreover, the link between how people think and how they get involved is noticeably clear when getting consumers' attention.

When it comes to attracting college students to events, free products have proven to be a game-changer.

This is particularly evident in the study by Gillis, Alanna, and Laura Krull (2019), titled "*I was there for the Free Food.*"

Their research⁶ highlights how free offerings can draw students in, often leading to unexpected engagement and participation.

A student recounts attending an event solely for free food and ultimately becoming an active, contributing member of the club.

The student's involvement led him to adopt new practices and values, and by his senior year, he raised \$40,000 for a religious service program.



Such testimonies show the power of free products to attract students. Some students join organizations for reasons unrelated to the group's primary focus, such as free food. Those two words can draw in any college crowd.

A study by Kim, Junha, Joe Goodman, and Selin Malkoc (2022) in *Advances in Consumer Research* highlights how promotions, such as "buy one, get one free" (BOGO), can lead to higher engagement.

Event organizers reported⁷ a noticeable increase in attendance when free items are involved, illustrating the tangible benefits of the freebie marketing strategy.

However, it is vital to understand that overreliance on freebies could lead to students coming with no genuine interest.

To combat this, businesses and campus organizations should integrate interactive activities along with their free products. Combining freebies and engagement opportunities maximize potential marketing strategies and minimize potential risks.

To make sure student interest goes beyond the first impression, businesses and campus organizations should incorporate follow-up activities. This approach will boost participation and foster a deeper connection with the student community.

Marketing

These insights highlight the marketing advantages of free product promotions. By understanding the psychological impact and engagement benefits of such strategies, businesses and campus organizations can effectively carry out campaigns that not only attract students but also foster long-term loyalty.

According to a study by Runge, Julian, Jonathan Levav, and Harikesh S. Nair (2022) in *Quantitative Marketing & Economics*, freebie promotions not only attract initial interest but also drive long-term brand loyalty. Data shows⁸ that consumers are more likely to remember and prefer brands that offer free products.

To determine the success of free products, organizations must analyze how the freebie promotions increase student interaction and involvement. Campus event organizers gave positive feedback on the long-term impacts of well-executed free product campaigns. They reported higher turnouts and stronger brand loyalty. To minimize the risk of low interaction, organizations should focus on quality and relevance to their student audience. The freebie technique ensures that free product promotions drive long-term success and student loyalty.

Outreach

Understanding the psychological and behavioral impacts of college students because of free products is crucial for businesses and campus organizations looking to enhance their outreach strategies. By following the insights from this research, associations can significantly improve student engagement and brand loyalty.

The success of the GroupMe chat demonstrates the power of effective outreach and the importance of free products to foster a sense of community and support among students.

While there may be limitations to the overuse of free products, thoughtful and strategic plans can lead to success.

Given these findings, the marketing outcomes are substantial. By understanding and leveraging the psychological impact of free products, businesses and campus organizations can craft strategic campaigns that not only attract but also engage and retain college students.

The freebie approach highlights the importance of integrating multisensory experiences and interactive activities to maximize the effectiveness of free product promotions and foster genuine connections with the student community.

End Notes

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Author Bio

Sydney Bachrach is a student at BYU. She is currently a pre-business student with the hope of studying Experience Design Management. She is from Nashville, TN. She loves playing sports and meeting new friends. Sydney is currently involved with BYU athletics, BYU connect, BYUSA, EXDS Society, and Y-Serve. She is constantly working with these groups on how to involve more students and she is passionate about the freebie strategy.

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So where is the free food on campus?



