# Causal Analysis

# of Customer Challenges with

# Ettics’ Store Package-Free System

## for

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# INTRODUCTION

# Purpose and Overview

Ettics is a sustainability concept store in Witten, Germany featuring eco-fashion, organic package-free food and body products, and a small café. Staff report new customers have a hard time understanding how to use the package-free system without staff support despite instructions being listed on the wall.

Instructions are written on the wall above the weigh-scales at the store entrance where customers are to weigh their empty containers before filling them with product. The instructions state ‘Leer wiegen + Gewicht notieren’ (weigh empty and write the weight) along with a hand-drawn picture of an old-fashioned weigh-scale. This appears to the insufficient in helping new customers understand the package-free system.

Staff are curious why this is as well as what instructional content and in what format would best support new customers aside from seeking staff support. This would also help ‘anti-social’ customers who are resistant to seeking or accepting staff support and who might be lost due to the insufficient written or visual instructions. The purpose of this research is to determine why new customers struggle to understand how to use Ettics’ package-free system and offer recommendations based on these findings.

# Definition

Throughout this report, ‘package-free system’ (also called ‘the system’) refers to the system used by customers at Ettics when purchasing food or body products that are not pre-packaged. This system requires customers bring their own re-usable container, weigh their empty container, write the weight directly onto the container, fill it with the product of their choice, and then finally bring it to the cashier for weighing and payment.

Throughout this report, ‘anti-social’ customers are those who staff notice are resistant to seeking or accepting staff support. They prefer figuring things out on their own, are not wanting to engage with others, might find staff who ask if they need support ‘offensive’ (as explained by a staff member), or perhaps have another reason for their resistance.

# Relevance

This report’s analysis will support the design of instructions that inform new customers how to use the store’s unique package-free system. This is integral to retaining new customers who might otherwise be lost due to confusion, embarrassment, or frustration when unable to understand the package-free system themselves. It would also greatly support the anti-social customers who prefer shopping without staff support. These cost-effective solutions will also be useful when designing the second location of the store which opens in August 2020 in Essen, Germany.

# Methods

This research focuses on customers’ experience of Ettics’ package-free system. Interviews with staff were conducted to understand the current challenges with the package-free system which informed the development of the customer survey questions. A customer survey was conducted in-store with 12 customers to understand customers’ challenges with the package-free system. The survey also identified which solutions were most appealing to customers. The interviews and surveys focused on store-usage and thus avoided personal or sensitive questions. The identities of customers have been kept anonymous.

# Limitations

This research is limited by the relatively small sample size (12 surveyed customers) and by the fact that not all sections of the survey were completed by all respondents.

# Scope of Inquiry

This report covers the following topics:

* Staff reports of customer experience.
* Customer reports of challenges with the package-free system and appealing solutions.

# Findings and Recommendations

The report concludes by outlining the main challenges experienced by customers with the package-free system. Cost-effective and easily implemented Recommendations are offered to improve the existing in-store instructions. Suggestions for the layout of the new Ettics store in Essen are also offered.

# DATA SECTION

# Findings and Interpretations of Staff Interviews

Three staff (two store-front staff and the CFO) were each interviewed independently on November 13, 2019 in the café section of the Ettics store. Each interview lasted roughly ten minutes and followed a semi-structured interview format. (The list of interview questions can be found in Appendix 1.)

## Customer Experience

When questioned about their sense of customers’ overall experience at Ettics, all noted the friendly and calm atmosphere of the store. They noted that it is not only the staff who are friendly, but also the customers themselves. Indeed, just before one interview began, a customer mentioned to us that they like spending time in Ettics because of the open and friendly atmosphere. Of course, customer experience varies, but staff sense the overall experience is very positive.

All three staff noted that customers get an ‘experience’ at Ettics. This ‘experience’ seems to be a culmination of the friendly, social, calm, and open atmosphere and the beautiful aesthetics of the store. The more ‘relaxed’ atmosphere sets Ettics apart from the busy, fast-paced atmosphere of normal supermarkets. One staff noted that many customers ‘hang around a bit’. For example, they might save Ettics as their last store on their day of shopping and stay for a coffee. One staff reported they hear customers say, ‘it’s cool to be here. People are young and friendly. It’s nice to be here. You can ask anyone for anything, or you can also just do it alone and just do your own thing’.

One staff also noted the smaller selection of products offered at Ettics compared to other stores means customers are less overwhelmed, which also contributes positively to the overall atmosphere. This is also supported by the aesthetically pleasing store layout and design.

One staff reported that they heard customers enjoy ‘being in contact’ with the products they buy. Since the products are in open containers, customers have the opportunity to see, smell, and sometimes taste products. Another benefit is that customers can purchase precisely the amount they need.

Staff reported that many customers are attracted to the store because of their selection of organic products. They also noted that customers are often people who already have some degree of eco-consciousness which one staff member defined as ‘people who think we need to make a difference and need to use less plastic and disposable things’.

Importantly, one staff member noted that it is not annoying for staff to be asked to explain the package-free system. As well, the store is sufficiently staffed to assist these new customers with personalized explanations.

## Main Challenges

When questioned about their sense of customers’ main challenges using the store, they all cited first-time customers’ challenge of using the package-free system. One staff believed, however, that customers only needed to be taught to use the system once and could then remember how to use it subsequent times.

All staff noted a major obstacle being customers who were more ‘anti-social’. These customers are not willing to ask for or sometimes even accept staff’s help. This is a problem especially when the written instructions posted on the wall are evidently insufficient for informing new customers.

## Barriers

Staff noted a few barriers which they imagine deter potential customers from shopping at Ettics. One staff member noted that some potential customers might hold the fear that the package-free system is hard to use. Another fear of potential customers is that the store is expensive (this was also echoed in an interview with one customer). However, all three staff noted that it is not more expensive than other organic stores, though it is more expensive than the average non-organic supermarket. Another challenge is that the package-free system requires customers develop the habit of remembering to bring containers with them to the store (this was also echoed in an interview with one customer).

One staff described that many new customers approach them and say, ‘it’s my first time here and I haven’t done this before; how does it work?’ Importantly, this is *not* felt as a burden for staff. Indeed, one highlighted their enjoyment in helping customers understand the system and affirmed that it is an expected part of their job.

# Findings and Interpretations of Customer Survey

Twelve in-person surveys were conducted with customers at the Ettics store in the afternoon of November 23, 2019. The survey was first translated into German, printed, and then handed out to willing customers who completed them by hand and returned them to the researcher before leaving the store. Respondents varied by age (roughly between 20 and 70 years old), were all Caucasian, and spoke German. Survey responses were later translated into English by a German speaker and analyzed by the researcher. Not all survey questions were answered by each respondent (all multiple-choice questions were answered but several long-answer questions were not which indicates customers’ lack of time or interest in the survey).

## Quantitative Survey Findings

### Level of Experience with Package-Free Systems

11 out of 12 respondents indicated they have used a package-free food system before (either at Ettics or at another store) which means that only one respondent had no previous experience with a package-free system. For 5 out of the 12 respondents, it was their first time using the package-free food system specifically at Ettics. This means that the survey data is biased with responses from customers who have used Ettics’ package-free system at least once.

### Easiness of the Package-Free System

Respondents were asked to rate their experience using the package-free food system for the first time without consulting staff or fellow customers (Figure 1 visually represents the responses). 9 out of 12 respondents rated their experience using the package-free system as ‘easy’. 1 customer rated their experience ‘very easy’, 1 rated it as ‘neither easy nor difficult’, and 1 rated it ‘somewhat difficult’. No respondents reported having a ‘very difficult’ experience using the package-free system.

The fact that the majority of respondents reported having an ‘easy’ experience does not align with staff reports of customer confusion when using the package-free system for the first time. This might be due to several factors. First, it could indicate that the system itself is not actually difficult, despite the fact that, according to staff, first-time customers do not know how to use the package-free system. Second, it could be that customers do not report their true level of difficulty out of embarrassment, wanting to please the researcher, or preserve the image of the store. Third, more returning users were surveyed than first-time Ettics customers (but even then, some of the new customers still rated it as ‘easy’, and at worst, ‘somewhat difficult’). Fourth, a specific survey is needed to target the experiences of ‘anti-social’ customers to determine how their experience is without staff support.

### Helpfulness of Current Instructions

Respondents were asked to rate how helpful they found the written instructions on the wall for understanding how to use the package-free system. 8 out of 12 respondents rated the current instructions written on the wall as ‘helpful’. 1 rated it as ‘very helpful’ and 1 rated it as ‘not so helpful’. No respondents rated it as ‘not helpful at all’. 2 respondents wrote individualized responses in the space provided for ‘other’ responses. The first wrote, ‘it is not needed; many things explain themselves’, indicating this customer thought instructions were not needed at all. The second wrote, ‘I was not aware of this’, indicating they were not aware there were written instructions on the wall. Evidently, both of these respondents had an easy time with the package-free system. Again, this does not explain why staff experience so many first-time customers struggling with the package-free system.

### Preferred Format of Instructions

Respondents were also asked to indicate how they would prefer getting instructions on how to use the package-free system. ‘Texts with pictures’ and ‘texts’ were most frequently rated by respondents as their first choice. Some respondents also separately noted ideas for instructions which are included in the recommendation section below.

## Qualitative Survey Findings

### Customer Experience

Taking a micro-phenomenology approach, respondents were asked to explain their experience using the package-free system for the first time, prompting them to consider what they did, what they felt, and what their thoughts were. Respondents answered this question in two ways: praising the store and noting their challenges.

Four respondents praised the store’s welcoming, light, and pleasant atmosphere. One was pleased that staff were not constantly asking if they needed support. Two affirmed that more stores should be package-free.

Several noted challenges they experience. One noted their insecurity of doing something wrong, especially spilling product when filling their container. One simply wrote that the system was ‘incomplete’ but offered no explanation. Another was unclear if they could bring their own containers for re-fill and if they could use something in the store to fill their containers (like spoons or shovels). A fourth respondent noted their confusion about where different products are located in the store. They suggested having more signs for ‘orientation’. One also noted their challenge of often forgetting to weigh their empty container before filling it with product (indeed, this was a challenge noted in one staff interview).

### Helpful Information for Instructions

6 customers offered responses when asked what information would have helped them understand how to use the package-free food system without consulting a staff member or a fellow customer. Some specified the kind of information (general information on the products, if the products are organic, product origins, rough system-use directions) while others specified the format and location (information posted on the walls, information on a screen, a board at the entrance, larger signs, longer explanations). There was also one idea to post signs with short explanations on one side and more detailed information listed on the back for those interested.

# Findings and Interpretations of Customer Interviews

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person with customers. One interview was conducted with a survey respondent on November 23, 2019; it was their first time using any package-free system. A second interview was conducted on December 4, 2019 with an individual who rarely shops at Ettics, having shopped there five times in the past couple years.

## Findings from First Customer Interview

One interviewee mentioned they would like to know which, if any, products were organic and certified by major certifiers like BioLand, Demeter, and Eko. (One staff explained in a preliminary interview with the researcher that the products are not labelled ‘organic’ even though many of them are grown organically because they have not undergone an official certification process.)

This customer also wished to know how the food prices at Ettics compare to similar stores (like the organic products at Rewe, DM, and Alnatura). This interest matched what staff mentioned in their interviews: customers are worried that Ettics prices are higher than other stores. (Staff clarified that yes, Ettics products are more expensive than the average non-organic super-market but have similar prices to other organic stores.)

They also noted their challenge shopping at package-free stores because of their nut allergy since the containers containing nuts are open.

They also mentioned their challenge is to visualize how much a certain weight is and would cost of each product (for example, what 500 grams of oats looks like). This is likely because some customers know how much product they want by the visual size but not by the numeric weight. Although the price per weight is listed on each product (for example, 1 euro per 100 grams of flour is written on the bulk container), the customer still has a hard time knowing how much their choice of product would cost based on how much they filled into their container. The customer then only knows the final cost once at the cashier.

## Findings from Second Customer Interview

The factors that deter this interviewee from shopping more frequently at Ettics are the high prices and challenge of creating the habit of remembering to clean their own re-usable containers and bring them to the store and a resistance towards the effort this would entail. Though they have a problem with plastic, it is not strong enough to change their actions yet. They are also not clear on what the impact of going package-free really is. They feel responsible but also feels exhausted with responsibility. At the moment they feel more responsible towards being vegan and have the energy to focus only on making this lifestyle change.

They mentioned though they are deterred by the prices, they do support the initiative and are attracted by the social scene at the store. They like the people who shop at Ettics and many of their friends shop there. They noted they would be excited to attend social events hosted by Ettics.

They also explained they would be more willing to shop at Ettics if there were discounts. They suggested a discount section, a different discounted item each week, or a scheme where after a certain number of purchases a customer would receive a discount or piece of Ettics merchandise like a poster.

Though they could not remember their first time using the package-free system, they said that since they are the ‘social type’ they probably immediately asked a staff member for help and found the system very easy.

# CONCLUSION

# Summary

Based on the customer survey, customer interviews, and staff interviews, customers seem to be having a very positive experience at Ettics. Customers communicated their enjoyment of the welcoming atmosphere, helpful staff, and aesthetic nature of the store. Some also affirmed that more stores should operate on the same package-free concept.

Regarding customer experience with the package-free system itself, there was an incongruence between staff and customer reports. Staff reported that many new customers have a hard time understanding the package-free system, often coming to them for help despite the instructions on the wall. This was contradicted by the majority of customer reports which stated that the package-free system was easy to use and only a couple of cases where customers were not totally satisfied with the current package-free system instructions. This discrepancy could be for several reasons:

* Customers’ previous experience at other package-free stores could have helped them understand Ettics’ system more easily.
* Customers might not have reported their challenges due to embarrassment, wanting to please the researcher, wanting to protect the image of the store, or having forgotten their very first experience trying to use the system without staff support.
* Some customers might have asked for staff support before even attempting to use the system by themselves.
* Customers who did have a hard time with the system were not surveyed.

Additionally, both staff and customer reports uncovered two key barriers that customers experience to shopping at Ettics. The first is that some customers perceive that prices at Ettics are higher than at other organic stores. The second is their resistance to developing the new habit of cleaning and then remembering to bring re-usable containers to the store.

If the customers surveyed really did find the system easy to figure out, then this is a good sign indicating that the system itself does not need to change. Further, even if new customers continue to ask staff for support, staff report a willingness and enjoyment in helping customers and expect it as part of their job. Nevertheless, the written instructions could be developed further to support the anti-social customers who prefer not to get support from staff. Numerous suggestions on improving the current instructions surfaced from the surveys and interviews which are detailed in the recommendations section below.

# Recommendations

The following section presents a series of recommendations based on the findings from staff interviews, customer survey, customer interviews, and the researcher’s in-store observations.

Numerous suggestions arose regarding informational and instructional content of interest to customers. Some pertains specifically to the package-free system while others offer suggestions on other store elements outside the scope of this research inquiry which are nonetheless useful.

## Recommendations for Ettics Witten Location

### Recommendations for the Package-Free System

* Based on customer preference, written step-by-step instructions combined with a picture of each step could be developed into a large poster. The pictures would help non-German speaking and illiterate customers. Adding colour could also help draw customers attention to the information. Based on the researcher’s first experience with the package-free system and observing other customers, the following system instructions could be valuable for new customers:

1. Place your empty container on the weigh-scale.
2. Write the weight directly onto the container either using a permanent marker or by writing the weight on a slip of paper and taping it to the container.
3. Fill your container with the desired product.
4. Once you are finished shopping, bring your containers to the cashier who will then weigh them and charge you by weight.

* Currently, tiny transparent jars contain small amounts of product, each stationed next to their corresponding bulk container, acting as samples. They allow customers to view and smell the product without needing to open the bulk container. To address the challenge that some customers have a hard time knowing what their product will cost after they fill their container, these sample containers could be adjusted to contain a particular weight of product and list the corresponding price. For example, display a jar with 500 grams of flour and list the price of this amount. This could help customers estimate the weight and price of their products more easily.
* It could be helpful to label the containers that are provided by the store and free for customers to use which are in the box under the weigh-scales. As well, based on feedback of one customer, it would be helpful to explain to include that customers are encouraged to bring their own containers for re-fill.
* Large signs reminding customers to weigh their empty container before filling it with product could help manage the problem that some customers forget this step. Several of these signs in a bright colour could be placed near the bulk containers in each section of the store.

### Other Recommendations

* Informational posters explaining the impact of going plastic and package-free could help inform skeptical customers who are less eco-conscious. For example, consider explaining how much energy, carbon, or water is saved. As one customer suggested, informational posters like this can have a short explanation followed by a longer description below so customers can access the level of information they need.
* Many people shop at Ettics because of the organic products. To cater to this audience, consider posting a written explanation in the store that the products are grown organically but have not undergone an official certification process and therefore cannot officially be labelled ‘organic’. Stickers could be used to label these non-certified organic products until properly certified.
* To correct the misconception that Ettics is more expensive than other organic stores, include a written explanation that food prices at Ettics are comparable to the prices of organic products sold at stores like Rewe, DM, and Alnatura. Clarify that Ettics’ prices fall between those at Alnatura and Rewe-Bio products. The rationale can be offered that paying a little more for some products at Ettics that have no packaging is supporting the environment. A description could read: ‘By shopping package-free at Ettics, customers save x amount of carbon and x amount of water.’
* Hanging large signs from the ceiling to indicate the ‘sections’ of the store and where certain categories of products can be found could help new customers orient themselves more easily.
* Offering larger strips of paper along with the small ones used to note the empty container weight. These larger slips could be used by customers who want to label their containers with the name of the product.

## Recommendations for the Future Ettics Essen Location

* Consider designing the future store in Essen in a way that makes it child-safe. This would help ensure safety of younger children and of store property.
* Consider making the shelves deeper. This would allow customers to more easily re-fill their containers by placing it on the shelf space directly in front of the bulk container they are taking product from. For example, the researcher noticed a woman struggling to hold her reusable container in one arm while trying to pump liquid soap into it from the bulk container.
* Consider a floorplan, shelving, and containers that contain nut products securely and in a way that makes it safer for customers with nut allergies. For example, consider confining the nut products to a separate room with a door that closes. Consulting other stores that have managed this problem is encouraged for design ideas. Another recommendation is to post signs warning that nut products are present and cross-contamination is possible.