

Canadians should not have to audit their grocery bills

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At a time when grocery costs remain a major concern for households across the country, Canadians shouldn't have to add 'receipt auditor' to their list of unpaid responsibilities, Fiona Tapp writes. Ben Margot/The Associated Press

Fiona Tapp is an Ottawa-based writer.

I ordered a roast through an online grocery app recently. The advertised price was \$22.30. When it arrived, the sticker on the package also showed \$22.30. Yet my receipt showed that I had been charged \$31.93.

You probably assume it was a simple mistake. But it wasn't the first time this has happened.

Over the past several years, I have become a reluctant grocery bill auditor.

I started relying heavily on online grocery shopping for the same reason many Canadians do: convenience. As a freelancer, working from home, my income depends on the hours I spend working at my desk. Time spent grocery shopping is time I'm not earning. Add a busy family schedule, including shuttling my son to Scout meetings and activities, and the appeal of clicking "checkout" from my home office instead of spending an hour in the supermarket is obvious.

What I didn't expect was that online grocery shopping would require me to carefully compare screenshots, scrutinize receipts and photograph product labels to ensure I was charged correctly.

The issue almost always involves meat products sold by weight. Retailers explain that listed prices are estimates because the final cost depends on the exact weight of the item selected. That explanation sounds reasonable enough, and a small difference between the estimated and final price is understandable.

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The problem is that weight alone does not appear to explain many of the discrepancies I have encountered. In some cases, the advertised price in the app, the price printed on the meat label and the amount charged on my receipt have all been different. On more than one occasion, the price displayed in the app matched the price printed on the package exactly, yet I was charged a higher amount. If the product label and advertised price agree, it is difficult to understand what explains the discrepancy.

Nor are these minor differences. Some have been substantial. In one order, salmon advertised at \$11.46 was charged at \$16.56. Beef advertised at \$12.24 was charged at \$16.28. In another case, a flank steak displayed at \$21.06 ultimately cost \$35.67, an increase of nearly 70 per cent.

These aren't isolated incidents. Looking back through my records, I found complaints spanning several years involving chicken, stewing beef, salmon, roasts and steak. Each time, I had to contact customer service to request a correction.

The amounts involved are rarely life-changing: Three dollars here, eight dollars there. But that's exactly what makes the issue worth discussing. Most people are unlikely to notice. Many consumers don't take screenshots before checkout. Most don't compare every item on a receipt against the advertised price. Few have the time or inclination to scrutinize package labels after unpacking groceries.

And why should they? When Canadians shop in-store, they generally assume the price displayed is the price they will pay. If an item scans incorrectly, many retailers have procedures for correcting the error. Consumers are not expected to photograph shelf tags before heading to the checkout.

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Online shopping appears to operate differently. Increasingly, the responsibility seems to fall on customers to identify pricing discrepancies and prove that they occurred.

The process of obtaining a correction can be surprisingly time-consuming. Most grocery apps allow customers to dispute charges, but in my experience, those disputes are not always resolved. On several recent occasions, I was forced to call the store directly, explain the problem, provide photographs and follow up again to obtain a refund.

What bothers me most is not the occasional mistake. Errors happen in any retail environment. What concerns me is the expectation that consumers should absorb the cost of finding and fixing those errors.

If a retailer's systems regularly generate price discrepancies, the burden should not fall on shoppers to document evidence, navigate complaint systems and chase down refunds. Customers are paying for convenience. They should not have to perform quality-control checks after every order arrives.

Online grocery shopping is no longer a niche service. For families juggling work and child care, seniors with mobility challenges and people without easy access to transportation, it has become an essential part of how they buy food.

As more Canadians move their grocery shopping online, pricing transparency matters more than ever. Consumers should be able to trust that the price displayed at checkout is reasonably close to the price they will ultimately pay. And when mistakes occur, correcting them should be simple and automatic.

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