

Supermarket Big Brother: The spy in your shopping basket... but how DOES Ocado know I'm Jewish?

MailOnline

Saturday, Apr 18 2009

DM.has("lightbox"); adverts.addToArray('google-link-unit','AAMSZ=468x15');

By Hilary Freeman

Last updated at 3:33 PM on 16th April 2009

A fortnight ago, I received an unexpected seasonal greeting via email. 'Chag Sameach, Hilary,' it read - to translate, that's Hebrew for 'Happy holiday'.

Last week saw the start of the Jewish festival of Passover.

How kind, I thought, at first.

But this was no ordinary greeting. It didn't come from a friend, relative or even a colleague.

It came from Ocado, the delivery partner of Waitrose. And, rather than being a thoughtful gesture, it was actually an invitation to spend my hard-earned cash on Passover groceries.



Worrying: Hilary Freeman was surprised when Ocado, the internet arm of Waitrose, sent her a Passover greeting indicating they keep information including her Jewish ethnicity

Call me paranoid, but this direct - and ethnic - marketing ploy made me feel slightly uneasy. How on earth, I wondered, did Ocado know I was Jewish?

Had I loudly exclaimed 'Oy Vay's me!' (a Yiddish phrase, loosely meaning 'woe is me') to the delivery driver when he accidentally dropped my yoghurts? Was it my - often but not always Jewish - surname, Freeman? Or the conspicuous lack of bacon in my weekly deliveries?

After racking my brains, I decided that Ocado could only have concluded I was Jewish because I have occasionally bought fried gefilte fish

balls, a Jewish delicacy, as part of my monthly shop. Now, you don't have to be Jewish to enjoy fishballs, but it helps. My non-Jewish husband finds them repellent.

Though I'm not a practising Jew, I am proud of my identity and have no wish to conceal it. Yet, it concerns me that a shop should mark me out as Jewish because I occasionally enjoy Jewish food.

Had I bought a curry, would Ocado assume I was Indian and send me 'Happy Diwali' greetings? And what else could they have concluded about me, by recording what I buy? Does the supermarket think that because I like Jewish food I must fit other racial stereotypes? Will it only be a matter of time before it sends me special offers on Woody Allen DVDs and self-help books?

As the grandchild of German Jews persecuted by the Nazis and forced to wear yellow stars before they fled to safety in Britain, being listed on any database as a Jew doesn't sit comfortably with me.



Supermarket ethnic profiling has reportedly been used by the authorities to mark out individuals for observation

What if this information were to fall into the hands of nationalists or extremists? Or what if a future government decided that people who eat fishballs are undesirables? You might think I'm over-reacting, but supermarket ethnic profiling has reportedly been used by the authorities to mark out individuals for observation.

Following the September 11 attacks, U.S. federal agents were said to have reviewed the shopping records of the terrorists involved to create a profile of ethnic tastes and shopping patterns associated with extremism.

Your online buying patterns can tell an interested party a great deal about your life

So, if the terrorists bought lots of pitta bread in the weeks before the attacks, anyone buying lots of pitta bread could in the future find themselves marked out as a potential terrorist. When store loyalty cards were introduced in the Nineties, there was a lot of concern about how the data they collated could be used to keep and disseminate private information about the public.

I remember being at a Michael Moore gig in which the film-maker invited the audience to cut up their store cards as a gesture of protest against big corporations. I'm ashamed to say I held on to my Boots card because I had £11 worth of points on it, which I was planning to cash in for a mascara.

Now that such cards have become commonplace, most people seem to have accepted them unquestioningly.

But the fact remains that every time you hand over your loyalty card, data is stored about what you've bought and how you've paid for it.

When you filled out the application form you'll have had to list such facts as your employment status and how many children you have. Buying anything online potentially has the same consequences.

The online shop will have a record of your purchases, how much you spend, where you live and how often you shop.

They'll use this to bombard you with marketing - unless you opt out - and could sell on this information to other stores. Your buying patterns can tell an interested party a great deal about your life.

My ethnicity is now on record. Sainsbury's also knows how green I am because it gives me Nectar points for every shopping bag I bring. It knows I'm time-strapped, because I buy ready chopped carrots, and that I have lots of headaches because I buy multipacks of paracetamol.

It knows I am conscious of my weight, too, because I buy skimmed milk. What does your supermarket know about you? Have you started buying nappies? You must have had a baby.

For now, this might mean that you get sent offers for toys or baby food. But imagine how this sort of information could be used in the future by a nanny state. Not buying enough fruit and veg? Your doctor could give you a lecture about making sure you eat your five a day.

And if you've been buying too many bottles of wine, you could find yourself in trouble for exceeding the healthy drinking limits - or you might even be refused NHS treatment for a liver problem. I've decided that the best way to stop the shops making assumptions about me is to subvert the system by confusing it.

I didn't buy my Passover groceries from Ocado - I bought an Easter egg instead.

And, when I make my next order, I might throw in a packet of bacon, a tin of dog food and some nappies.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1170315/Supermarket-Big-Brother-The-spy-shopping-basket--DOES-Ocado-know-Im-Jewish.html#>