THE PLAYBOOK

The Price Check

How I stopped a competitor price sheet from being re-fixed forever by treating every price as a dated reading, not a fact. The repeatable method behind that: read the regular price correctly, take size from the package, put a store and a date on every row, then freeze it and log the drift. Plus the honest chapter on when a frozen snapshot is the wrong answer.

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Date it, then defend it closing

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OPENING

Every re-check found something new

A sales lead needed one answer before a pitch: where does our product sit against the competition on the shelf? The tool for that was a price sheet built from the stores' own product pages. It grew to well over a hundred rows, and then it stopped being finishable.

> THE PATTERN, AS IT SHOWED UP
>
> "Row 47 is wrong, the page says something else now." Fixed. Next round, a different row, a different store, the same sentence.

Every re-check found new "differences", and every re-check turned into a round of fixes. Nobody had written down a rule that separated a price that was wrong when it was read from a price that had simply changed since. Without that rule, every check looks like a correction, and the sheet is never done.

THE FORK IN THE ROAD

THE SAFE MOVE

Update every row to the latest price. It looks current and nobody can say the number on the page disagrees. It also mixes stores and dates in one table, and it never finishes, because the prices never stop moving.

THE MOVE I MADE

Freeze a dated snapshot and log drift. Every row carries the store and date it was read. Later differences go in a note, not into the price. Only readings that could not have been right get corrected.

Figure: the decision that turns a price sheet from a chore into evidence.

This playbook is that method, written for small brands and sales leads who need a price picture they can defend in a meeting. It ends with the honest chapter: when a frozen snapshot is the wrong move, because a method that claims to always apply is a slogan.

CHAPTER 1

A price is a reading

Online prices change by store and by day. Many sites pick a store location for you before they show a price. Two people opening the same link an hour apart can see two different numbers, and both are telling the truth.

A difference is not always an error. There are two kinds. A price that was wrong when it was read: the wrong pack size, a sale typed in as the regular price, a price lifted from a "related items" strip. And a price that was right when read and has moved since. The first is a mistake. The second is just time passing.

The sheet has to say which is which. That is only possible if every number carries where and when it was read. A price with no store and no date cannot be defended or corrected, only replaced.

> THE BET
>
> The question is "where does the product sit in the range?" A dated snapshot answers that well. Chasing every new price adds cost without changing the answer.

There are three honest ways to handle a moving price. I weighed them like this:

OPTION	WHAT IT BUYS	WHAT IT COSTS
Keep updating every row	Looks current	Mixes stores and dates; never finishes
Re-read everything at one store, one day	Cleanest data	Often impossible: sites assign the store themselves
Freeze a dated snapshot, log drift	Honest and finishable	A reader clicking a link may see a different number

I chose the third, and the cost in the last column is the one to plan for. The answer to "the link shows something else" is the date on the row, said calmly, with the drift note beside it.

Decide your drift rule before the first re-check, not after. A rule written after the arguments start will be bent to settle them.

CHAPTER 2

Only a sale is a discount

Most wrong rows are not typos. They are the wrong price read off a page that shows four of them. Store pages mix the regular price, a real sale, a member price, a coupon and a "compare at" figure, often in the same box. The rules that keep them apart:

> **Regular is the shown price,** unless a real store sale is shown. Then regular is the struck-through price and the sale goes in a separate discount column.

> **Member, loyalty, coupon and compare-at prices are never a discount.** They are not the regular price and not the sale price. Ignore them.

> **A struck price beside a member price is the regular price.** The lower number is for members only.

> **Prices from "related items" on the same page do not count.** Only the product's own buy box.

An invented example, using trail mix brands, shows how the same layout produces different answers:

PRODUCT	SHOWN	STRUCK	LABEL	REGULAR	DISCOUNT
Brand A, Store 2	5.49	5.99	Sale	5.99	5.49
Brand A, Store 3	4.99	5.79	Compare at	4.99	None
Brand B, Store 4	3.49	4.19	Member price	4.19	None
Brand C, Store 3	5.79		Coupon 0.50 off	5.79	None

> THE RULE
>
> Only a real store sale creates a discount. Every other label is decoration, and it never moves the regular price down.

> SEE IT YOURSELF
>
> A free version of these rules is live at **me.kabuhayan.app/tool-shelf-price-normalizer**. Paste the price exactly as shown, any struck price and its label; it returns the regular price, discount, price per unit and flags.

CHAPTER 3

Build the snapshot

The method is a sequence, and the order matters: decide what you are comparing before you open a single page, and decide when it is finished before you start checking.

Step 01 **Split competitors into two tiers**

Direct: a shopper would swap it for yours. Benchmark: same shelf, different product. Confirm the split with the sales lead.

Step 02 **Fix store categories and one location**

Specialty, mass, club, online, brand direct. One store location, recorded on every row.

Step 03 **Read the store's own page**

Never a reseller or a delivery marketplace. Apply the regular versus sale rules from chapter 2.

Step 04 **Take size, count and format from the package photo**

Then record store, location, date and a clickable link on the row. Log every miss (not carried, blocked, no price) with a reason.

Step 05 **Have a second reviewer re-open every source**

Each row marked OK, corrected or unverified, with evidence.

Step 06 **Summarise on a size band, then freeze**

Averages by store category and tier, your product beside them. One independent acceptance audit, then the file is final and dated.

> **Size band, or no average.** Averages use only packs inside a set size band. Bulk and multi-packs stay out of size and price averages.

> **Under 3 rows is directional.** Any average built on fewer than three rows is labelled that way, every time.

> **After the freeze, a new price is drift.** A different number at a different or unknown store gets a note, not an edit.

CHAPTER 4

Freeze it, then log the drift

The freeze rule is what ended the loop. Once the acceptance audit has run, every later difference goes into one of three boxes, and only one of them changes the price.

CORRECT

Could not have been right

Wrong size, a sale entered as the regular price, a related-item price. These were errors on the day they were read.

LOG

Moved since

A different price at a different or unknown store. Write it in the row's note with the date. Leave the price alone.

RE-READ

Moved a lot

Drift above about 25%. Re-read it at a named store, because a gap that size may be a different product.

There is one exception, and it is narrow. **A source with one national price**, the same everywhere, gets updated to the latest same-day read. There is no store to disagree with, so the newest reading is simply the better one.

WHAT THE SNAPSHOT DEFENDS

Where the product sits in the range on a stated date, at stated stores. Every number traceable to a page and a day.

WHAT IT DOES NOT CLAIM

That today's page shows the same number. The date on the row is the answer to that, not a correction.

> STATED PLAINLY
>
> A snapshot is not a mistake. Put a date and a location on every number you collect from the web, and decide your drift rule before you re-check.

Worth being precise about what this is evidence for. One study, one product, one sales question. With the rules in place, it went from a handful of seed rows to 100 to 150 checked rows across 30 to 40 brands in about a working day. The speed came from the rules, not from cutting corners, and it would not survive a study whose question really is "what is the price today". What generalises is the habit: a number with a date can be defended, and a number without one can only be replaced.

CHAPTER 5

How price sheets go wrong

A price sheet fails in predictable ways. Each of these happened or nearly did. Each has a cheap catch.

> **A sale typed into the regular column.** The sheet now says the competitor is cheaper than it is. Catch it by re-opening the page and looking for "sale" or "was" text near the price.

> **A related-item price captured.** The number is real, just for another product. Catch it by matching the price to the product's own buy box.

> **Size or count taken from page text.** Product descriptions are written badly. One page called a pouch a box. Catch it with the package photo: when a fact is printed on the thing itself, look at the thing.

> **The location changes silently between reads.** The site picked a different store and nobody noticed. Catch it by recording the store shown on the page every time.

> **Endless re-checking.** Several narrow rounds, each looking at whatever had just been discussed, each finding a new class of problem. Catch it with one independent acceptance audit against a fixed checklist, then the freeze.

The subtlest one was in the checking itself. A pass that read only page text left dozens of size cells as "not shown", and then changed a correct value that had come from the package front. The checker was confident and wrong, and the file took the edit.

> THE TRAP TO AVOID
>
> Do not let a check write into the file. Reviewers report a verdict with evidence: pass, error, drift, no link, unverifiable. A finding that disputes a rule goes to the person who owns the rule, not into the price column.

Unverifiable is a valid verdict. Disclose it on the row. A guessed price is worse than an honest blank.

CHAPTER 6

When not to freeze

A method that claims to always apply is a slogan. There are real cases where a frozen snapshot is the wrong tool, or only part of the right one.

> **When the decision is today's price.** If you are setting a launch price this afternoon or answering a buyer's "what does it cost right now", you need a same-day read at named stores. A snapshot from last week is history.

> **When the source has one national price.** Then drift is not location noise, it is a real change. Update it to the latest same-day read, as chapter 4 says.

> **When the drift is the story.** If a competitor has repriced across every store, logging it row by row hides the one fact that matters. Write it up and re-run the study.

> **When the sample is too thin.** Two rows in a store category cannot carry an average. Freezing them adds false confidence. Label them directional or leave the category out.

> **When nobody will use it soon.** A snapshot ages. One built months before the meeting should be re-run, not defended.

Even in these cases, half the method survives: **put a store and a date on every number.** Whether you freeze or refresh, a reading you can trace is one you can explain in the room.

> THE TEST TO APPLY
>
> Is the question "where does it sit in the range" or "what is it today"? If the range, freeze and log drift. If today, read it today, at a named store, and date it anyway.

CLOSING

Date it, then defend it

Before the re-checks, one quiet decision: chase every new price, or freeze a dated snapshot. Everything in this playbook is downstream of choosing to freeze, with a store and a date on every row, the regular price read correctly, and size taken from the package instead of the page.

The prices kept moving after the file was final. That was never the problem. The problem was a sheet that could not tell a mistake from the passage of time, and a sales lead who could not say which numbers to stand behind.

The price rules from this story did not stay a one-off. They became a free tool on this site, which is its own lesson: the rule you write to end one argument is the rule you will want for the next study.

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THE TOOL

The snapshot checklist

Run this on any competitor price study a sales lead will have to defend. If a box will not tick, chapter 6 applies.

BEFORE YOU READ A PAGE

- [ ] Two tiers defined (direct and benchmark) and confirmed with the sales lead
- [ ] Store categories and one store location fixed
- [ ] Size band chosen; drift rule written, including the about 25% re-read line

WHILE YOU COLLECT

- [ ] Store's own pages only; no resellers or delivery marketplaces
- [ ] Regular versus sale applied; member, coupon and compare-at ignored
- [ ] Size, count and format from the package photo
- [ ] Store, location, date and link on every row; misses logged with a reason

BEFORE IT IS FINAL

- [ ] Second-reviewer verdict on every row, with evidence
- [ ] Summary on the size band; averages under 3 rows labelled directional
- [ ] Independent acceptance audit run; reviewers report, they do not edit
- [ ] File frozen and dated; later differences logged as drift

THE LIVE ARTIFACT

The price rules from this story are free at **me.kabuhayan.app/tool-shelf-price-normalizer**, alongside the other operations tools at me.kabuhayan.app/tools. Paste your rows as shown on the page, and it returns a cleaned table and averages by store category and tier.