

With odds like these the money's in the bag

Fancy a £1.20 return on a 40p bet? You do? OK, cheese and onion or smoky bacon?

David Spiegelhalter



I wish it would rain, and then I could be rich. Well, not really rich, but at least win £10 in the rain-forecasting competition currently being run by Walkers Crisps. For those not yet addicted, you enter a code found on each packet of crisps on to a website that allows you to choose one of 21,000 2km x 2km squares covering Great Britain and Ireland where you think it will rain over the next couple of days. If it rains in your square in your chosen three-hour period then you get £10.

My partner and I have become obsessed with this competition, especially since we won £30 between us last week. Only one bet a day is allowed, so nobody is going to win a packet. But Walkers has so far given away around £430,000 based on 360,000 bets. These are good odds: about 1 in 8 entries is winning £10, so an entry has an expected return of

£1.20, while a packet of crisps is only about 40p. So let's hope that Walkers has done its risk assessment and that even a wet November will not mean a repeat of Hoover's disastrous 1992 free flight offer that ended up costing it £50 million.

I was initially surprised that the first squares to go are in the English cities, which is where people live rather than where it rains — southern Ireland is always the last area to be picked, even though in my experience it suffers an almost continuous downpour.

Then I realised that this picking of familiar areas might be an example of what is known in psychology as the "availability heuristic", which is a fancy scientific way of saying that people judge events as more likely if they can easily conjure up images of them occurring, regardless of the real odds. Which is fine by me, as it improves the chances of finding a good square for those of us who are willing to use the Met Office forecast.

Of course, another explanation is that nobody trusts the Met Office, which has tended to get a bad press since last year's unfortunate "barbecue summer" claim. What was forgotten in the subsequent July deluge was that the forecast only claimed a 65 per cent chance of above-average temperatures

and below-average rain, and the first prediction turned out to be correct. But the media coverage put the dampers on seasonal forecasts, now abandoned.

But it's exactly such numerical chances that I could do with to improve my odds of winning. The Met Office does produce probabilities for rain, which it sells to its corporate customers but, unlike in the US, they are not handed out to consumers. One of the problems is how to communicate uncertainty about

My partner hates crisps, so she goes through bins for empty packs

future weather; should it be through language ("might be a hurricane"), or numbers ("30 per cent chance of snow"), or charts and pictures? People vary hugely as to what they want and understand, so there is no one answer.

Meanwhile, at home we spend hours discussing strategy. Is it best to bet before 8am on, say, Monday, when you can use the latest forecast to predict for Tuesday, but when most of the squares have gone, or wait until after 8am when you can bet on

Wednesday or Thursday, which gives you more choice but a less accurate forecast? We cackle with glee when the Met Office predicts a huge bank of rain coming in over the West Coast, gloating as we pick a juicy square in the middle of the sodden Welsh countryside.

The returns are even greater if you don't buy the crisps in the first place. My partner does not even like the things, so she finds her entry codes by searching the gutters and rummaging through bins for packets. At the weekend we stood on a platform transfixed as a child solemnly shovelled cheese-and-onion crisps into his mouth, waiting for the delicious moment when he would fling the empty packet on to the platform, behaviour that would until recently have driven me into a rage.

But no, his nice, neat mother tucked it into her bag. We suspected that beneath her smug civilised exterior she was planning to use it to feed her gambling addiction, and all at the expense of her innocent child's future health. Perhaps the Met Office will get blamed for that too.

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