COSTCO

WAS COSTCO RIGHT TO MAKE ITS OWN BRAND A REASON TO JOIN?

One name on the paper towels and the salmon.
One card to reach them.

SUBJECT	JUDGED ACROSS	AS OF	STATUS
COSTCO	4 PS · 12 STANDARDS · 3 LENSES	13 NOVEMBER 2026	SIGNED · ISSUED

BEFORE YOU READ

What you're reading.

A PUBLISHED READING

A Published Reading is Kill Dull's judgment of a marketing decision a company has already made, out in the world. It is built from the public record alone: what the company has said, what it has done, and what independent sources have measured. Every source is listed.

The decision goes through the full interrogation: its consequences across the four Ps, twelve Standards, three lenses, the strongest case on each side, and what we don't know. AI researches and argues both sides. Every finding and the verdict are human judgments. Then it is published, so the judgment is on the record for anyone to read and challenge.

This Reading was made without a word from Costco.

HOW MUCH DEEPER A PRIVATE READING GOES

A Published Reading only sees what a company chose to show. A Private Reading starts from the inside, before the decision is made.

You make the case: the commitment, why you believe in it, and the evidence that matters, including the research, numbers and plans no outsider sees. We interview the people closest to the decision. If something material is missing, we ask. Every Standard is then tested against your evidence, not against assumptions from the outside.

You receive more than a verdict. You receive the reasoning: what the evidence supports, what it doesn't, what remains uncertain, where the judges agree and where they don't. Signed, confidential, and yours, while there is still time to change course.

HOW THE INTERROGATION WORKS

Every commitment puts different things at stake. We follow the consequences through twelve lines of inquiry, each applied once, across the four Ps. Not every Standard matters equally every time. That's why judgment matters.

THIS READING

THE DECISION	In 1995 Costco put one house brand, Kirkland Signature, on products held to "as good as, or better than" the national brands, at a lower price, and has widened it across the warehouse ever since.
THE BET	A brand members can only reach through Costco, trusted across every aisle, makes the membership itself worth paying for.
THE RISK	One name on everything means one failure reaches everything, and a brand anyone can copy or buy without joining is no reason to join.
WHERE IT STARTS	In Product. Its consequences reach Price, Place and Promotion.
JUDGED	As a decision first made in 1995 and renewed ever since: an ongoing decision, as of 13 November 2026.

01 · THE CASE

One name. Every aisle. Thirty-one years.

THE BRAND	YEAR	THE CLUB AROUND IT
Kirkland Signature launches; about two dozen items by October	1995	Private label 7–8% of Price/Costco's sales
Kirkland sales almost triple; Costco's almost double (WSJ)	Since 2017	Sam's Club folds 20 brands into Member's Mark
$56 billion, plus $24 billion in Kirkland fuel	Fiscal 2023	
About $86 billion "last year", about a third of revenue (WSJ)	2024	Fee rises to $65, first increase since 2017
Thirty years; lawsuits over apparel "dupes"	2025	81 million paid members; 92.3% renewal
Kirkland penetration "continues to improve"	2026	84.1 million paid members; fees $5.9 billion

THE DECISION

In 1995 Price/Costco launched Kirkland Signature, named after its headquarters town; one brand for everything was co-founder Jim Sinegal's idea. It promised quality "as good as, or better than" national brands, and Costco folded its other store brands into it over the following years. There is no end date: every new Kirkland item still goes to the CEO for sign-off.

THE CONTEXT

Costco earns most of its operating income from membership fees: $5.9 billion of $11.7 billion in fiscal 2026. It carries fewer than 4,000 items per warehouse. Costco's own magazine framed Kirkland as a way of "increasing the value of your membership".

WHERE IT STARTS

The decision is made in Product: one name and one standard for every item that carries it. Its consequences reach the price members pay, the places they can buy it, and how Costco persuades people to join.

COMPETING EXPLANATIONS

Low prices on national brands, fuel, the treasure hunt, Executive rewards (42.3 million of 84.1 million paid members hold the tier) and delivery could each explain why members join and renew. The fuel is itself sold as Kirkland. Costco explains recent changes in renewal by how members signed up, not by Kirkland. No public source separates these drivers. The Reading judges the decision on its logic and evidence, not on Costco's size.

02 · THE FOUR Ps

One decision. Four places it lands.

The decision starts in Product. Its consequences reach the price members pay, the places they can buy and the reason Costco gives them to join. The four Ps mark where the consequences fall; the Standards judge them.

P · FIGURE	CONSEQUENCE	EVIDENCE	TENSION · UNKNOWN
PRODUCT **≈⅓** of Costco's revenue: Kirkland's $86 billion "last year", as reported by the Wall Street Journal, July 2025	**Where the decision starts: one name and one standard, on toilet paper, salmon, wine, fuel and silver bars.**	About 550 Kirkland items among some 3,800 (Fortune, 2024). Every new item goes to the CEO for sign-off; failures, such as Kirkland toothpaste, are pulled. In 1995 one analyst expected 10% of volume "at best".	TENSION Estimates of share run from 23% without Kirkland fuel (Fortune) to about a third (WSJ). UNKNOWN Kirkland's current share on a stated basis, and who makes most of it.
PRICE **15%** reported cap on Costco's markup for Kirkland, against 14% for national brands (WSJ, July 2025)	**Kirkland has to be cheaper than the national brand beside it, and at least as good.**	Costco's CFO: Kirkland typically gives 15% to 20% more value than national brands, at equal or better quality. Fiscal 2026 price cuts included walnuts, $13.79 to $9.99.	TENSION The fee, $65 in the US since September 2024, is paid before any Kirkland price is seen. UNKNOWN How much of members' savings comes from Kirkland.
PLACE **939** warehouses Costco operated at its fiscal 2026 results, 24 September 2026	**Kirkland is sold through Costco: warehouses, website and, increasingly, delivery partners.**	Kirkland is on Instacart, Uber Eats and, in the US since September 2026, DoorDash, which asks for a membership. On Instacart non-members can buy Costco goods, Kirkland included, at prices reported up to 13% to 15% above members'.	TENSION Each channel open to non-members weakens the claim that you must join to have it. UNKNOWN How much Kirkland non-members buy, and whether they then join.
PROMOTION **92.3%** US and Canada renewal rate at fiscal 2026 year end (Costco, 24 September 2026)	**Costco calls Kirkland "one of the main reasons to become a member".**	84.1 million paid members, 42.3 million on the Executive tier. The 2026 ACSI study credits store brands with helping drive Costco's satisfaction (81); Sam's Club scored 83.	TENSION Costco says Kirkland is a reason to join; members renew. No public source connects the two. UNKNOWN Whether Kirkland is why people join, or what they buy once they have.

Costco's 10-K does not report Kirkland's sales, but the shareholder letters in its annual reports gave them for some years: over $35, $39, $52 and $59 billion in fiscal 2017, 2018, 2020 and 2021. Other Kirkland figures come from earnings calls and independent reporting, and differ on whether Kirkland fuel is counted. The 14% and 15% markup caps are the WSJ's reporting; Costco's filings do not state them. Costco's fiscal year ends around 31 August.

03 · THE INTERROGATION

Twelve Standards. Every side argued.

Each Standard ends in an interim finding, not a verdict; the findings inform one judgment and are never added up.

STANDARD 01 OF 12

Relevance

Does this matter to the people we need to matter to?

INTERIM FINDING

AAH.

HERE

Does Kirkland sit where members spend every week, or on the margins?

EVIDENCE

Kirkland's biggest sellers are everyday goods: toilet paper ($1.4 billion in 2022), paper towels and bottled water. The brand runs from groceries to fuel. Costco calls it "one of the main reasons to become a member".

THE CASE FOR

Kirkland is on the things members buy every week. A brand that matters on toilet paper, water and fuel matters to every household that holds a card.

THE CASE AGAINST

Relevance to the basket is not relevance to the decision to join. People may join for prices on brands they already know and buy Kirkland once inside.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Whether Kirkland is on the list of reasons people give for joining.

STANDARD 02 OF 12

Distinctiveness

Does this make the company easier to recognize or easier to replace?

INTERIM FINDING

AAH.

HERE

Does one name across every aisle make Costco harder to replace?

EVIDENCE

One name, rather than a portfolio of store brands, since 1995. Sam's Club, the closest rival, merged its 20 brands into one, Member's Mark, only in 2017. Its chief executive said in 2024: "Costco did such a great job of that over the years with Kirkland."

THE CASE FOR

Kirkland is the only place members can find Kirkland. The same name on wine and on tires makes the brand impossible to miss and hard to substitute.

THE CASE AGAINST

A single store brand is now the category's common practice. Member's Mark reportedly carries about 30% of Sam's Club sales, against about 28% for Kirkland at Costco (CNBC, 2024).

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Whether shoppers can tell Kirkland and Member's Mark apart on quality.

STANDARD 03 OF 12

Value

Does this build perceived value or spend it?

INTERIM FINDING

AAH.

HERE

Does Kirkland add value to the membership, or spend the trust that membership earned?

EVIDENCE

Costco's CFO says Kirkland typically gives 15% to 20% more value than national brands at equal or better quality. Kirkland's reported markup cap is 15%. Costco's annual report says Kirkland items also "generally carry higher margins than national brand products".

THE CASE FOR

A low markup and a quality floor turn the fee into a bargain: every Kirkland purchase is a reminder of what the card is worth.

THE CASE AGAINST

The value claim is Costco's own. No independent study cited here compares Kirkland's quality and price with national brands across the range.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

How members value Kirkland against the fee, measured independently.

STANDARD 04 OF 12

Credibility

Will people believe this from us?

INTERIM FINDING

HMM.

HERE

Do people believe “as good as, or better than” the national brand, across everything?

EVIDENCE

The 2026 ACSI study says store brands help drive Costco’s satisfaction (81, down 1%). Lululemon sued in 2025 over Kirkland pants and outerwear it called copies; those claims were settled in 2026. Deckers sued over slippers. Recalls in 2025–2026 included Kirkland smoked salmon (FDA Class I, the highest risk level), poke and madeleines.

THE CASE FOR

Thirty years of members buying again is the evidence. A recall handled quickly and a product pulled when it underperforms keep the claim honest.

THE CASE AGAINST

In apparel, “as good as” can read as “looks like”. Copying lawsuits tie the name to imitation, and one recall under one name is a recall of the whole brand.

WHAT WE DON’T KNOW

Whether the “dupe” cases or recalls have moved trust in Kirkland at all.

STANDARD 05 OF 12

Delivery

Can we deliver what this decision asks people to believe?

INTERIM FINDING

AAH.

HERE

Can Costco keep a quality floor on products it does not make itself?

EVIDENCE

Costco makes some private-label goods itself; most of the manufacturers behind Kirkland are not disclosed. Every new Kirkland item goes to the CEO's office. Toothpaste was pulled when it could not keep up with Colgate and Crest; the first two Kirkland beers "fizzled out". The CEO says Kirkland is where Costco has "the most control of the supply chain".

THE CASE FOR

Costco delivers what it controls: the specification, the buyer's judgment, the right to pull an item. A limited range makes that discipline possible.

THE CASE AGAINST

Much of the quality is made in factories Costco does not own. Each new category multiplies the suppliers whose failure reaches the name.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

How often Kirkland items fail Costco's own tests, and what happens to suppliers who fail.

STANDARD 06 OF 12

Coherence

Does this make the company add up better?

INTERIM FINDING

AAH.

HERE

Do Product, Price, Place and Promotion point the same way?

EVIDENCE

Fewer than 4,000 items per warehouse. A reported markup cap of 14%, 15% for Kirkland. Sold through Costco's warehouses, website and delivery partners. Membership fees of $5.9 billion, about half of fiscal 2026 operating income, down from 69% in fiscal 2017. Costco says Kirkland is a reason to become a member.

THE CASE FOR

A limited range leaves room for one strong brand; a low markup makes it a bargain; selling it through Costco makes it part of the card; the fee pays for the low markup.

THE CASE AGAINST

Instacart, which sells Kirkland to non-members, pulls one P the other way.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Whether members experience Kirkland as part of the membership or simply as a cheaper label.

STANDARD 07 OF 12

Ownership

What about this can genuinely become ours?

INTERIM FINDING

HMM.

HERE

What about Kirkland does Costco genuinely own?

EVIDENCE

Costco owns the name, a trademark its annual report counts among the brands it protects. It makes some private-label goods itself; Kirkland products are reportedly also made by suppliers that include national brand owners. Sam's Club copied the single-brand model and reached a similar share of sales; in the 2026 ACSI study it scored 83 to Costco's 81.

THE CASE FOR

Thirty-one years of trust in one name cannot be bought. Rivals can copy the model; they cannot copy the history.

THE CASE AGAINST

The model is copyable and has been copied. The products come from suppliers who can make them for others.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Whether any rival's brand has come close to Kirkland's standing with shoppers.

STANDARD 08 OF 12

Identity

Does this make the company more itself or less itself?

INTERIM FINDING

AAH.

HERE

Is Kirkland what Costco is, or a product line it sells?

EVIDENCE

Costco's chief executive Ron Vachris: Kirkland "is synonymous with our culture and core values". Sinegal called its creation one of the crucial developments in Costco's history. The brand carries the name of Costco's first headquarters town.

THE CASE FOR

Kirkland is Costco's promise in a package: a limited range, a low markup and quality it will put its name on. Selling it is Costco being itself.

THE CASE AGAINST

A brand on silver bars, apparel "dupes" and fresh poke may say more about range than about principle.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Whether members see Kirkland as Costco's character, or just as Costco's label.

STANDARD 09 OF 12

Precedent

What will this yes make easier to say yes to next?

INTERIM FINDING

HMM.

HERE

What did one trusted name make it easier to say yes to?

EVIDENCE

From about two dozen items in 1995 to some 550 by 2024. Kirkland fuel, rosé, apparel, fresh poke and silver bars. In fiscal 2026, Kirkland matcha powder and 1-ounce silver bars.

THE CASE FOR

Trust earned on paper towels lets Costco enter new categories without building a new brand each time.

THE CASE AGAINST

Each yes stretches the name further from the categories that built it. The apparel lawsuits show where the stretch can land.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

What Costco has refused to put the name on.

STANDARD 10 OF 12

Compounding

What happens if we keep doing this?

INTERIM FINDING

AAH.

HERE

Do trust, share and membership keep building on each other?

EVIDENCE

From 7–8% private label in 1995 to between a quarter and a third of sales today, depending on the definition. On Costco's own figures, Kirkland sales rose about 69% from fiscal 2017 to 2021, net sales 52%. Renewal in the US and Canada rose from 90% in 2017 to 92.3% in 2026.

THE CASE FOR

Every good Kirkland purchase raises trust in the next one. Trust has compounded for three decades, and the brand is still growing faster than the company.

THE CASE AGAINST

The more of the basket carries one name, the more one failure can cost.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Whether Kirkland's growth is now drawing new members or deepening the spend of existing ones.

STANDARD 11 OF 12

Alignment

What else has to move for this to work?

INTERIM FINDING

AAH.

HERE

What has to keep working for the brand to stay a reason to join?

EVIDENCE

The limited range, the reported markup caps, the buyers who write the specifications and the CEO's sign-off. Membership fees that make a low markup affordable. The 2025 annual report names a loss of member confidence in Kirkland as a risk.

THE CASE FOR

The parts were built to fit one another: low markups need the fee; the fee needs a reason; Kirkland supplies the reason.

THE CASE AGAINST

If the fee is the profit, the pressure to raise it never goes away, and each rise asks Kirkland to justify more.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

How much of the fee members attribute to Kirkland.

STANDARD 12 OF 12

Stewardship

What must we protect while we change?

INTERIM FINDING

AAH.

HERE

What must Costco never let go of while Kirkland grows?

EVIDENCE

The quality floor, unchanged in Costco's words since 1995: as good as or better than the national brand. The CEO's sign-off. The willingness to pull what underperforms: "We can't fall in love with our own stuff."

THE CASE FOR

Costco has protected the standard and the sign-off since 1995.

THE CASE AGAINST

As the brand nears a third of sales, the pressure to fill the range may outweigh the discipline to pull from it.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

How Costco decides when a Kirkland item fails.

04 · THE THREE LENSES

Human Nature. Conditions. Time.

The twelve Standards judge the decision. Three lenses then test whether that judgment will hold: with people, in the world around them, and over time.

People, and the world around them

Evidence can tell us what people did.

It can't guarantee what people will do next.

The world moves too.

LENS

Human Nature

What will people actually notice, want, believe, remember, resist or choose?

INTERIM FINDING

HMM.

HERE

What do people trust, and what do they come back for?

EVIDENCE

People renew: 92.3% in the US and Canada. Costco explains recent changes in renewal by how members signed up, not by Kirkland. The ACSI links store brands to satisfaction. In 1995 Supermarket News reported a warning that business members might be wary of an unfamiliar name; the brand grew anyway.

REMOVING FRICTION	**Sometimes removing friction creates value.** Kirkland removes the comparison. One trusted name on every aisle means members no longer have to weigh brands; the choice is made for them, at a price they need not check.
THE FRICTION IS THE VALUE	**Sometimes the friction is the value.** The card is the friction: a fee paid before anything is bought. Kirkland gives that friction a reason. Instacart, which sells the brand without the card, removes the friction, and some of the reason with it; DoorDash asks for the card.

THE CASE FOR

People trust a name they have tested on cheap things before they trust it on expensive ones. Kirkland lets them build that trust aisle by aisle.

THE CASE AGAINST

People join for a deal, not a label. They may credit the low price, not the brand, and would not miss Kirkland if the prices stayed.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

What members would do if Kirkland disappeared.

LENS

Conditions

The world moves too. Culture, economics, technology, politics, the planet.

INTERIM FINDING

HMM.

HERE

What in the world around Costco could make Kirkland a stronger or weaker reason to join?

EVIDENCE

US store brands reached 21.3% of dollar sales in 2025, up from 19.1% in 2021. The Supreme Court struck down IEEPA tariffs in February 2026; Costco had sued for refunds and received $184 million in its fourth quarter. Kirkland is now on DoorDash, Uber Eats and Instacart.

CULTURE	**What could change what this decision means?** Store brands have lost their stigma: 21.3% of US dollar sales in 2025, up from 19.1% in 2021. "Dupe" culture could turn Kirkland's promise from "as good as" into "looks like".
ECONOMICS	**What changes when people feel richer or poorer?** Poorer, and Kirkland's value claim strengthens. Richer, and members may drift back to brands they know; there is no public evidence that this has happened.
TECHNOLOGY	**What could technology change about this decision?** Delivery apps put Kirkland in more homes and, on Instacart, in non-members' homes. Costco's digitally enabled comparable sales grew 20.9% in fiscal 2026.
POLITICS	**What could politics or policy change?** Tariffs land first on imported goods Costco sources itself. The 2026 Supreme Court ruling brought refunds; other tariffs remain. Costco's stated response: source more at home and lean on Kirkland, where it has "the most control of the supply chain".
PLANET	**What could the physical world change about this decision?** Costco says Kirkland is where its sustainability work starts, because it sees the whole supply chain: 1.5 million pounds less plastic in Kirkland packaging in fiscal 2025. Climate shocks to crops would reach the brand directly.

THE CASE FOR

When people feel poorer, store brands gain; Kirkland was ready.

THE CASE AGAINST

Tariffs land on imported Kirkland goods first; Instacart makes the brand reachable without the card; "dupe" lawsuits test where imitation ends.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Where trade policy settles, and how many non-members buy Kirkland through apps.

Over time

Some consequences take longer to show themselves.

Years. Sometimes decades.

LENS

Time

What strengthens, erodes and compounds? How far can it change? What does it make possible next?

INTERIM FINDING

AAH.

HERE

What does time do to a brand built to be a reason to join?

EVIDENCE

Thirty-one years of one name and one standard. Fees raised in 2017 and 2024; members kept renewing.

STRENGTHENS	**What strengthens?** Trust in the name, purchase by purchase, across more categories every year.
ERODES	**What erodes?** Exclusivity. A single store brand is now standard practice, and Instacart makes Kirkland reachable without joining.
COMPOUNDS	**What compounds?** Share: from 7–8% private label in 1995 to between a quarter and a third of sales today.
HOW FAR	**How far can the company change without becoming less itself?** So far, from cookies to fuel and silver bars. The limit holds while the quality floor and the CEO's sign-off hold.
WHAT NEXT	**What does this decision make possible next?** Domestic sourcing, more control of the supply chain, more categories, without the cost of building new brands.

THE CASE FOR

Time has worked for Kirkland. Each year adds categories, trust and share, and the brand has outgrown every forecast made at its launch.

THE CASE AGAINST

Time also makes the model ordinary. Rivals have copied it, and convenience channels make the club less of a wall around it.

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Whether Kirkland's pull holds as Costco opens more doors to non-members.

Dull rarely happens all at once.
Neither does density.

05 · THE JUDGMENT

What carried the most weight.

1 **One standard the company has kept.** Stewardship and Delivery. Established: the "as good as, or better than" standard dates from 1995, every new item needs the CEO's sign-off, and items that fail are pulled. It weighed most because the decision's promise rests on it.

2 **All four Ps built to need each other.** Coherence and Alignment. Established: a limited range, reported markup caps, sales through Costco, and fees that make up about half of operating income. Inference: Kirkland gives the fee its reason.

3 **A brand that has outgrown every forecast.** Compounding. Established: one analyst in 1995 expected 10% of volume "at best"; Kirkland is now between a quarter and a third of sales and growing faster than the company.

4 **Costco being itself.** Identity. Established: the chief executive calls Kirkland "synonymous" with Costco's values. In our judgment, the brand is Costco's operating philosophy put in a package.

5 **The link to joining is inferred.** Relevance and Human Nature. Reasonable inference only: Costco says Kirkland is a reason to join and members renew at 92.3%, but no public source connects the two. Human Nature is HMM for that reason.

THE STRONGEST CASE AGAINST

Is Kirkland a reason to join, or only a reason to buy?

The strongest case against: people join Costco for low prices on brands they know, fuel, Executive rewards and the treasure hunt, and buy Kirkland once inside. On that view the brand earns margin, not members, and Instacart sells it to people who never pay the fee. The evidence meets this only in part. Costco says Kirkland is one of the main reasons to join. Kirkland sales are about a third of revenue, on the WSJ's figure, and growing faster than the company. Members renew at 92.3%, through fee rises in 2017 and 2024. But none of this isolates Kirkland. Costco explains changes in renewal by how members signed up; Sam's Club, with a copied model, outscored Costco in the 2026 ACSI; research on Dutch supermarkets finds heavy store-brand buyers loyal to savings, not to one chain's brand. No public source asks members why they join. That the brand is a reason to join is, on the public record, unproven.

WHAT AAH, HMM AND DULL MEAN

AAH.	The commitment deserves to be made.
HMM.	Something consequential remains unresolved.
DULL.	The commitment does not deserve to be made in its present form.

WHAT WE KNOW, WHAT WE INFER, WHAT IS OPEN

ESTABLISHED	REASONABLE INFERENCE	UNRESOLVED
Launched in 1995, promising “as good as, or better than” national brands. Kirkland is about $86 billion a year, by the WSJ’s 2025 report. Renewal 92.3% in the US and Canada; 84.1 million paid members. Membership fees, $5.9 billion, about half of operating income. Costco calls Kirkland “one of the main reasons to become a member”.	The “about a third” share includes Kirkland fuel; without it, nearer a quarter. Kirkland gives the fee a reason that national brands alone could not. The trust built over thirty years is harder to copy than the model.	Whether Kirkland is why people join and renew. How much Kirkland is bought by non-members through Instacart. Who makes most Kirkland products. Whether “dupe” lawsuits or recalls have moved trust. Where tariffs settle for imported Kirkland goods.

FIFTEEN INTERIM FINDINGS

01	Relevance	AAH.	02	Distinctiveness	AAH.
03	Value	AAH.	04	Credibility	HMM.
05	Delivery	AAH.	06	Coherence	AAH.
07	Ownership	HMM.	08	Identity	AAH.
09	Precedent	HMM.	10	Compounding	AAH.
11	Alignment	AAH.	12	Stewardship	AAH.
	Human Nature	HMM.		Conditions	HMM.
	Time	AAH.			

Interim findings, not verdicts. Nothing is scored or added up: the verdict is one human judgment across the whole decision.

WHAT WOULD CHANGE OUR MIND

- Member research showing Kirkland plays little part in why people join or renew.
- Evidence that a large share of Kirkland sales go to non-members through Instacart.
- A recall or safety failure that measurably damages trust in the whole brand.
- Evidence that Member’s Mark or another rival matches Kirkland’s standing with shoppers.
- A court ruling that Kirkland products infringe on the designs of the brands they compete with.

06 · ONE VERDICT

The four Ps deserve one verdict.

The commitment deserves to be made, and kept: Kirkland is Costco's operating philosophy put in a package.

What it does for customers. Kirkland gives members a shortcut they can trust: one name, across the warehouse, that is meant to be as good as the brand beside it and cheaper. In our judgment, that turns the fee from a toll into a key. What members get behind the door is not only lower prices on what they already buy, but a brand they cannot buy as well anywhere else.

What it does to the company. It gives Costco a product it controls in a business built on other companies' products. On the public record, Kirkland has grown from a two-dozen-item launch to between a quarter and a third of sales, faster than the company itself and, on Costco's own account, at higher margins than national brands, while Costco has kept its standard and its sign-off. That much is demonstrated. In our judgment, it is also how a membership becomes worth renewing.

What weighed most. Stewardship, Delivery, Coherence, Alignment, Compounding and Identity, because they hold across all four Ps: one standard, a limited range, a low markup, sales through Costco, and fees that pay for the low markup. In our judgment, Kirkland is the clearest expression of what Costco is.

What remains unresolved. That Kirkland is why people join is Costco's claim and our inference, not a measured fact. Instacart sells the brand to non-members. Credibility, Ownership, Precedent, Human Nature and Conditions are HMM: "dupe" lawsuits and recalls test the promise, the model has been copied, every new category stretches the name, no one has asked members why they join, and tariffs and new channels move the ground. None outweighs what the decision has built. All of them are worth watching.

AAH. HMM. DULL. 2026

AAH

INDEPENDENT MARKETING JUDGMENT

SIGNATURE

Peter Buck

FOUNDER & CEO, KILL DULL

DATE OF JUDGMENT 13 November 2026

Sources

Built from the public record: every source was published by, and opened on, 13 November 2026. AI researched and argued both sides; every finding and the verdict are Kill Dull's.

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WAS COSTCO RIGHT TO MAKE ITS OWN BRAND A REASON TO JOIN?

In 1995 Costco put one name, Kirkland Signature, on products meant to be as good as the national brands for less, and made it a reason to join. This Reading argues every side of that decision from the public record before the verdict.

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Humans judge.