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The taming of desire: lessons in consumer welfare

By *Nicole Mead*

It sounds like a paradox, but allowing your customers to manage their desire for your products could make for happier customers in the long run. This is a key finding of newly published research into consumer behaviour and which has important implications for marketers responsible for relationship building with online customers.

Amazon, iTunes, and almost every online store on the planet today use shopping carts and wish lists on their websites. These handy tools let you “shop” without the downside of imminent payment. You can earmark items you like and come back to them later. Importantly, you can postpone the moment of transaction to any time you are ready – more options for consumers, more encouragement to consume.

That, at least, is the theory. In practice, according to the results of a recent study we conducted entitled *The taming of desire: unspecific postponement reduces desire for and consumption of postponed pleasures*, these tools could have just the opposite affect. Our research reveals that the simple act of postponing a temptation to a later, non-specific time (‘I’ll buy that later’) reduces our desire for an item, and in turn, our *consumption* of it in practice.

While this research has implications for the role of online shopping functions that allow for the indefinite postponement of purchasing, it also – and perhaps more importantly – has implications for how companies create strategies that aim to create a satisfied consumer base. Perhaps the key to happy customers lies in building

brands that encourage consumers to purchase products without “binging” on them. Seem counter-intuitive? While it is true that marketers have rarely contemplated ways to help curb the desires of their customers, we could argue that there are very good reasons why they should.

Consumer guilt

Few people could dispute the many virtues of online shopping. But the ability to purchase items without leaving our homes has brought with it an unprecedented level of temptation to consume. With this temptation comes conflict: consumers often desire more than they can afford or use. If they give in to their desire, they are often hit with consumer guilt. If they don’t, they are distracted by thoughts of these items on a daily or even hourly basis.

Much research has been conducted on this. Typically the cycle is that a consumer, faced with a temptation they wish to resist, will try to exercise self-control, eventually break down and give in, feel guilty and, as a consequence, try to stay away from the source of temptation altogether. An example of this might be a consumer of

books on Kindle, who repeatedly buys books that he or she does not have the time to read, struggles with guilt and eventually eschews Kindle completely. This negative cycle was of interest to both Vanessa Patrick, co-author of the research paper, and myself. In marketing, there is an increasing focus on consumer welfare. While concerns for consumer well-being are a primary driver within this area of research, also of importance is finding a better fit between brands and the needs of consumers. When people consume in a moderate way, they feel less remorse, they exhibit greater pleasure in what they have purchased, and have a better feeling about the brand. Having happier consumers is a goal of most companies in the business of selling products and services.

But how do consumers better manage their temptations so that they can enjoy the product more, instead of eventually not using it at all? How do we avoid a situation where a company might become a source of torment or anxiety? Because, clearly, that’s not what the company wants either.

So far, research shows that when it comes to resisting desire, human willpower is very limited. Desire is a well-studied aspect of human psychology, and we know that it is very difficult for people to consciously moderate their desires. But what if there were a way in which people could moderate their desires? That would certainly be a more reliable path to successful consumption reduction than trying to increase our willpower to resist them.



“...a pattern exists in human behaviour in which every time consumption is postponed, desire for the product is weakened.”

Unspecific postponement

Often scientists are inspired by the observations they make in their own lives. During my PhD, I had a weakness for cookie dough ice cream. Sometimes my cravings were so strong, I found myself making trips to the supermarkets just to buy ice cream. One day, in the supermarket, I told myself I could have it some other time. As the days passed, I found myself increasingly able to pass ice-cream stores without an internal war, and eventually walking to the checkout counter in the supermarket without the thought of going to the ice-cream aisle. I had observed a curious thing: the more I postponed having ice cream, the weaker was my desire.

My co-author and I decided to explore this conjecture. Would people do better by saying ‘some other time’ instead of ‘no, not ever’ in response to temptations? Furthermore, would people interpret unspecific postponement (‘I’ll have it some other time’) as a signal that they didn’t strongly value the temptation, in turn reducing their desire and thus consumption of it?

The results of our research confirmed our hypothesis. Indeed, we can now say with some certainty that a pattern exists in human behaviour in which every time consumption is postponed, desire for the product is weakened. Not only that, but postponing temptations proves to be a much more effective way of reducing

unwanted consumption than self-restraint, which brings with it a host of interesting new research possibilities. But the key words here are: unspecific postponement. Postponement must be to an unspecified date and time, not deferment to a different, specific date and time.

Why? This finding fits with classic theories regarding human behaviour and inner mental states, which suggest that we often make inferences about how we feel based on behaviours. When people make specific plans to do or buy something, our minds start preparing: we are committed to this event which, in turn, leads our minds to make inferences regarding how much ▶

we must value the event or product, ie, considerably. When a plan is unspecific, we no longer think about the plan, our motivation to fulfil it is reduced, and we perceive this as a signal that we do not strongly value that which we have postponed. Desire for it is reduced and, subsequently, consumption.

Of course, this only applies in situations where postponement is self-induced, not imposed, and only in relation to products where there exists this conflict between desire and self-control.

A good example of a practical implication of this research might be seen in regards to reminder emails that companies disseminate when people have not checked out their shopping carts. Reminding them of this delay could be inadvertently communicating to consumers that they must not value the product. These are the conjectures that we are currently investigating with research into companies and Wish Lists.

On the other hand, companies should strive to help their customers

isfaction with a company's products will develop stronger, more positive relationships with a brand or product, which is perhaps a better strategy for ensuring long-term success. ■

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The paper, *The taming of desire: unspecific postponement reduces desire for and consumption of postponed pleasures*, written by Nicole L. Mead and Vanessa M. Patrick appears in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol 110(1), Jan 2016, 20-35. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0039946>

“...customers who feel less guilt and more satisfaction with a company's products will develop stronger, more positive relationships with a brand or product...”

Moderate consumption

These findings are relevant for companies in many ways. Companies are increasingly making it possible for consumers to defer consumption, thinking that if they give them a safety net they will encourage them to consume. But this delay could reduce how much these consumers value and desire the product. At the same time, if a company bombards their consumers with temptation in relation to certain products, the conflict that this causes within their consumers could cause them to avoid exposure to the temptation altogether.

exercise better self-regulation, and not just for consumer welfare purposes. If the simple act of unspecific postponement reduces desire with subsequent consequences for better self-regulation, consumers are more likely to make choices that they feel good about.

Given that constant buying and not buying at all are the two consequences of focused efforts to tempt consumers, companies might do better by aiming for moderate consumption by their customers – the average of the two. The benefits of this are clear: customers who feel less guilt and more sat-

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