

# Holiday shopping: Choosing a favorite may increase the likelihood of purchase

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This shopping season, salespeople looking to increase the likelihood of a sale can simply ask the potential buyer which of several items they prefer. According to new research from the Journal of Consumer Research, this skips the first part of the mental purchasing process. Instead of “Should I buy at all?” the consumer is moved immediately into the mindset of “Which one should I buy?”

Thus, while the shopper might have been merely window shopping without any prior intention to make a purchase, they are now more likely to proceed as if a decision to buy has already been made, reveals the study.

“Stating a preference appears to induce a which-to-buy mindset, leading people to think about which of several products they would like to buy under the implicit assumption they have already decided to buy one of them,” write Alison Jing Xu and Robert S. Wyer, Jr. (both of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology). “Consequently, they are more disposed to make a purchase than they otherwise would be.”

Making a purchase is a two-step mental process, the researchers explain. Consumers first decide whether or not they want to buy at all. Then, they decide which of the available options they prefer. Sometimes, however, consumers indicate a preference for an item before they go to the register. For example, customers who are browsing or window-shopping might be asked by a friend which of several products they like the most.

In a series of four studies, the researchers reveal that this phenomenon occurs in both hypothetical and real world situations. The purchase mindset was even activated when participants were asked to choose among unrelated items. For example, consumers who were asked to choose a favorite computer become more inclined to make a purchase in another, quite different domain: vacation packages. In another study, 28% of participants who were asked to indicate their preference for one option in a set of products or services – including mp3 players, restaurants, and mobile phones – purchased candy after the experiment, versus just 2% of the control group.

“Therefore, people who are asked to indicate which of several products they prefer without thinking about whether they want to make a purchase at all are likely to proceed as if the “whether” decision has already been made affirmatively,” the researchers explain.

They continue: “Salespersons may increase the likelihood of making a sale by inducing customers to consider which of several products they prefer while at the same time distracting them from making a decision of whether they really want to buy anything at all.”

Citation: Alison Jing Xu and Robert S. Wyer, Jr., “The Effect of Mindsets on Consumer Decision Strategies.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2007.

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