

# Test-drive: Using a product before buying it changes what you want

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Consumers often decide to buy an item before having a chance to try it out. In this scenario, they tend to prefer products with more features. However, a study from the December issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* expands our understanding of the differences between direct experience and indirect experience.

Rebecca W. Hamilton (University of Maryland) and Debora Viana Thompson (Georgetown University) reveal that once consumers actually try products, their preferences shift from the item with the most bells and whistles to the one that is easiest to use.

“Our studies indicate that after using a product, consumers think more concretely than they do after reading a product description without using the product.” Hamilton and Thompson explain. “After using a product, consumers become more focused on its feasibility (i.e., how do I obtain the product benefits?) as opposed to its desirability (i.e., what are the product benefits?).”

For example, study participants were asked to choose between an mp3 player with more pre-loaded songs and one that was easier to use. Those who were only given product information (indirect experience) were more likely to choose the player with more songs. Those who were given a chance to try the product (direct experience) were more likely to choose the device that was easier to use. Interestingly, two weeks later, the majority of participants in both groups preferred the device that was easier to use, indicating that consumers who purchase a product based on

an indirect experience – such as an advertisement or seeing on display—are more likely to be ultimately dissatisfied with their purchase.

“Specifically, before using a product, consumers tend to prefer products with many features and capabilities, but after using a product, consumers tend to prefer simpler products that are easier to use,” the researchers write.

They continue: “Thus, consumers may be selecting products based on indirect experiences that do not maximize their satisfaction during subsequent direct usage experiences. This an important issue for firms concerned with customer satisfaction as well as for consumers.”

The authors reveal some of the underlying mental processes behind this phenomenon. They argue that direct experience with products puts people in a concrete, practical mode of thought, focusing on what it would actually be like to use the product. In contrast, indirect experience gets people thinking more abstractly. When participants were encouraged to think concretely in an unrelated task before making a product choice, their preferences were the same as the group that had direct experience with the product.

Citation: Rebecca W. Hamilton and Debora Viana Thompson, “Is There a Substitute for Direct Experience” Comparing Consumers’ Preferences After Direct and Indirect Product Experiences.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2007.

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