

Stimulating the appetite can lead to unrelated impulse purchases

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Exposure to something that whets the appetite, such as a picture of a mouthwatering dessert, can make a person more impulsive with unrelated purchases, finds a study from the February 2008 issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research*. For example, the researchers reveal in one experiment that the aroma of chocolate chip cookies can prompt women on a tight budget to splurge on a new item of clothing.

“We found that an appetitive stimulus not only affects behavior in a specific behavior domain, but also induces a shared state that propels a consumer to choose smaller–sooner options in unrelated domains,” explains researcher Xiuping Li (National University of Singapore). “Similarly, the presence of an attractive woman in the trading room might propel an investor to choose the investment option providing smaller but sooner rewards.”

In the first experiment, Li asked participants to act as “photo editors of a magazine” and choose among either appetite stimulating pictures of food or non-appetite stimulating pictures of nature. A control group was shown no pictures at all. All were then asked to participate in a lottery that would either pay them less money sooner or more money later.

Those who had been exposed to the photos of food were almost twenty percentage points more likely to choose the lottery with the chance of a smaller, more immediate payoff than those who were exposed to the photos of nature (61 percent vs. 41.5 percent) and eleven percentage points more likely to choose the short-term gain than those who had not

been exposed to any stimulus (61 percent vs. 50 percent).

Similarly, another experiment used a cookie-scented candle to further gauge whether appetitive stimulus affects consumer behavior. Female study participants in a room with a hidden chocolate-chip cookie scented candle were much more likely to make an unplanned purchase of a new sweater – even when told they were on a tight budget – than those randomly assigned to a room with a hidden unscented candle (67 percent vs. 17 percent).

“The scent of the appetitive stimulus led to reduced happiness with remote gains, which implied that participants in a present-oriented state were less sensitive to future values,” Li explains. “In addition, [this] experiment showed that participants were more likely to satisfy their current and spontaneous desire if they were exposed to the unrelated appetitive stimulus before they made the decision.”

Li concludes: “If retailers want to push their customers to shop more rather than stay longer, they should not only maintain a pleasant environment but also an environment full of temptations and excitement.”

Source: University of Chicago

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