Touch can trump taste, says Rutgers retail scholar

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For some consumers, the way a cup of mineral water tastes has more to do with the container than the contents. Especially for consumers who are less likely to enjoy touching items or products before deciding to buy them.

According to new research conducted by Maureen Morrin, an associate professor of marketing at the Rutgers School of Business—Camden, manufacturers and marketers need to consider how their product packaging feels if they want consumers to make the purchase.

Morrin and Aradhna Krishna, a professor of marketing at the University of Michigan, examined how the varying firmness of otherwise identical cups affected the evaluations of taste by more than 1,000 men and women who were served samples of the same mineral water.

The research suggests that companies "should not skimp on the touch-related aspects of their products," says Morrin. "Touch is an important part of the consumer experience – a benefit that should not be discounted simply because we don't ordinarily consciously process that information."

In their research, Morrin and Krishna focused on how "nondiagnostic haptic cues" – those unrelated to product quality, such as the feel of the container – affect the process of consumer decision-making. The researchers were especially interested in the effects of cues with negative connotations, such as the flimsy feel of a cup.

Consumers generally fall into one of two categories: Those with a high need for touch (NFT), and those with a lower NFT. Given that high-touchers are more apt to squeeze the grapefruit (or the roll of toilet paper) before making a selection, they would seem more likely to take the quality of the container into account when assessing the taste of the water. "We had that hypothesis at the outset of our project," Morrin says.

But the Rutgers—Camden researcher found that participants in the experiment who had a higher NFT made taste judgments that were significantly less affected by the feel of the cup than did lower-NFT people. Members of the latter group were consistently more likely to have less favorable judgments about the taste of the water when it was served in a flimsy cup, and more favorable assessments when the same water was served in a firm cup.

"That's why research is so interesting," Morrin says. 'If you only always confirmed your hypotheses, it would be considerably less exciting a field."

The difference in taste evaluations between high- and low-touchers held even when the research subjects did not touch the cups but were told about the firmness of the bottles in which the water is sold. In this case, the low-NFT people were willing to pay higher prices for the water, simply by being told that bottles were firmer.

While other research has found high-touch consumers to be overly influenced by tactile cues when making decisions in the marketplace, Morrin and Krishna's findings suggest that is not always the case. It appears that consumers who like to touch products while shopping may be more skillful (even unconsciously) at evaluating information gained through touch than low-touch consumers.

"High-NFT shoppers appear to know when the information gained through touch should influence their decisions, such as when trying to buy a soft sweater or a lightweight computer, and when it should not, such as when tasting water served in a firm or flimsy plastic cup," Morrin says.

Morrin's previously published research includes how and why consumers make decisions, as well as the factors involved - including the ability to remember brand names, and how that ability is affected by ambient odors.

Provided by Rutgers University