

# Filling in the blanks: Consumers want complete information to make choices

October 14 2008

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Most people don't like to make a purchase without complete information about the product they're buying. For example, if someone comparing wireless plans doesn't know the coverage area, she may be more likely to walk away from the purchase.

A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* examines the way consumers behave when information about a purchase is incomplete. Authors Kunter Gunasti and William T. Ross, Jr. (Pennsylvania State University) suggest that there are ways for marketers to reduce the number of customers who leave empty handed.

According to the authors, shoppers need to learn to make inferences about missing information. "This research demonstrates that both explicitly and implicitly prompting consumers to make inferences about the missing attributes reduces the tendency to defer choices and increases the likelihood that consumers will make a purchase decision," the authors explain. "In parallel, consumers who generate spontaneous inferences are also more likely to make a purchase decision."

In a series of studies, the researchers asked participants to make choices among health clubs, wireless service providers, and laptops. Some participants had complete information and others did not have access to certain attributes of the options, like the fees or contract areas for wireless plans. A striking 31 percent of people chose a "no-choice" option when information was missing. In subsequent studies, researchers asked some participants to fill in the blanks of missing attributes. Fewer

of the people asked to make inferences selected "no choice."

"Marketers can easily apply these methods in many purchase contexts. For instance, when shopping in retail stores, consumers can be covertly prompted to make inferences by sales people or in-store displays, and this may decrease the probability that they leave the store without making a purchase decision," the authors conclude.

Source: University of Chicago

Citation: Filling in the blanks: Consumers want complete information to make choices (2008, October 14) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-10-blanks-consumers-choices.html>

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