

Researcher find that retail display fixtures can affect consumer perceptions of products

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In virtually all stores, consumers view products on display fixtures that are presumed to be of little consequence. Yet, suppose that you were shopping for a set of trendy new coffee mugs and noticed some on a nearby table or shelf. Would your evaluation of just how trendy the mugs are change depending on the display fixture's surface material -- the piece of glass or wood beneath the product? According to University of Minnesota researcher Joan Meyers--Levy, there is reason to believe so.

This work, by the same duo who investigated the effects of ceiling height on people's actions, explores how a consumer's self-view and the display surface a product rests on can interact to affect perception. In research forthcoming in the Journal of Marketing Research, Meyers-Levy, a marketing professor at the Carlson School of Management, and co-author Rui (Juliet) Zhu of the University of British Columbia use lab and field experiments to demonstrate this effect.

"Retailers cannot directly control shoppers' perceptions of their goods, but they can anticipate or manipulate the kind of cognition self-view their target consumer uses," said Meyers-Levy. To some degree, this could be accomplished by considering customers' demographic profiles, but marketers could also try to actively shape shoppers' mindsets. In her research, Meyers-Levy demonstrated that simply putting up posters that encouraged shoppers to adopt an independent or an inter-dependent self-view had this effect, thereby influencing their perceptions of products displayed on different table top surfaces.

For consumers, these findings offer an opportunity to be savvy. "If a shopper is aware of the tools used to enhance brand reputation or sales," said Meyers-Levy, "they will be much more likely to make an informed decision, rather than going home with the wrong product."

Meyers-Levy offers this example to illustrate her argument: "Imagine you are at work. All day you have been collaborating on a team project, focusing on a team goal. This experience puts you in an inter-dependent mindset - you have a more global view of the world, where things you encounter are viewed as interconnected. If you go shopping at lunch, this self-view will affect your perceptions of products."

"If a product is part of the display, then the perceptions the consumer has of the fixture become part of their perception of the product. For example, if the consumer thinks that wood is "earthy," then a product -- a mug, a shoe, a watch -- displayed on a wood table will seem more natural or traditional. Or if the product is on a glass table, an inter-dependent minded consumer would think of the very same product as more hip and modern, assuming they think of glass as hip and modern."

"Conversely, if someone had been working all day in a setting where they were competing with others for a promotion, they would be thinking more about themselves as a separate distinctive person who is unlike others; their mindset will be independent. In this case, the shopper would ascribe characteristics to the product that are opposite of those associated with the display surface. Thus, they would regard the mug, shoe, or watch as hip and modern when it is displayed on a wood table, but natural or traditional on a glass table."

Many brands are positioned on dimensions such as trendy (e.g., Diesel), traditional (e.g., L.L. Bean), or all-natural (e.g., Aveda). Meyers-Levy's findings indicate that display surfaces or merchandising can either bolster or damage such product perceptions. For retailers, this insight

can also help in choosing displays that offer continuity with their brands.

The paper, "The Influence of Self-View on Context Effects: How Display Fixtures Can Affect Product Evaluations," and more information on Professor Meyers-Levy can be found at: carlsonschool.umn.edu/marketinginstitute/jmeyers-levy .

Source: University of Minnesota

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