

# The blushing shopper: Does it matter what else you put in the basket with the anti-gas medication?

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Buying certain products can be embarrassing. But a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* says shoppers should make more conscious choices about what to add to their shopping carts to alleviate the embarrassment.

"Shopping basket composition can determine how consumers feel when purchasing embarrassing products. Contrary to [conventional wisdom](#), additional purchases don't always reduce embarrassment but may worsen it instead," write authors Sean Blair and Neal J. Roese (both Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University). "And when additional products do reduce embarrassment, it's not just because they hide the embarrassing product."

Suppose a consumer needs to buy something embarrassing like a package of anti-gas medication or foot deodorant. He might start thinking about how other [shoppers](#) will react to the purchase and try to deflect attention from the product by buying something else. However, this strategy could backfire—or even make him feel more embarrassed if he chooses something that inadvertently reinforces the impression he wants to avoid.

In one study, the authors asked people how embarrassed they would feel if they were purchasing *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Improving Your IQ*. Half of the participants were purchasing only the book, but the

remaining half were told they were also purchasing an issue of Scientific American and a Rubik's cube. The results showed that the additional products made participants feel less embarrassed, but not because they hid the embarrassing book. "People felt less embarrassed because they thought the [intelligent products](#) would compensate for the book, essentially 'canceling out' the unintelligent impression," the authors write. A follow-up study showed that the more people believed the additional products would balance against the embarrassing book, the more effective the products were at reducing embarrassment.

"Consumers tend to think about the products they buy holistically rather than individually, and a product's meaning can change depending on what else is being purchased at the same time. An additional purchase can either attenuate or exacerbate [embarrassment](#) depending on whether it counterbalances or complements the embarrassing product," the authors conclude.

**More information:** Sean Blair and Neal J. Roese. "Balancing the Basket: The Role of Shopping Basket Composition in Embarrassment." *Journal of Consumer Research*: December 2013.

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