

Making information hard to read can have benefits

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Research by Elise Chandon Ince shows that sellers can sometimes benefit by making information hard to read or process.

(Phys.org) —Making consumers exert more effort to buy something—through midnight releases, for example, or long waits outside the store—has been a successful marketing strategy for companies seeking to fuel consumer interest in new products such as

shoes, movies, and electronic goods.

But does making product or service information harder to read or process bring similar benefits to sellers?

Yes, in some cases, says Pamplin College of Business marketing assistant professor Elise Chandon Ince.

"There is an abundance of [theoretical research](#) showing that making information easy to process for consumers is the best way to go," Ince says. However, recent research that she conducted with Debora Thompson, of Georgetown University, shows that "in certain instances, increasing processing difficulty can have a positive impact" for the service provider.

Ince says that a well-known 2008 study by psychology researchers showed that people judged an exercise routine and a cooking recipe to be more difficult when the instructions were hard to read, due to the font used.

Participants in that study, she says, "misinterpreted the difficulty of reading the information as indicative of the amount of effort and skill required to actually perform the task and thus were less willing to do it."

Building on that study's findings through their research, Ince and Thompson found that [information processing](#) difficulty not only leads to perceptions of task difficulty but also motivates people to hire service providers for the task. Moreover, "the more effortful and demanding the task seemed, the more skilled the agent seemed to the consumer and the more valued the service."

Ince says that these effects were obtained only when the participants believe that the [service provider](#) is competent—increasing information

processing difficulty does not enhance the service agent's value when competence is in doubt.

Businesses should not make it impossible for consumers to read their materials, Ince says, as this would likely drive customers away.

"Calibration is certainly an important practical issue, and more research is needed to investigate the optimal levels of information processing difficulty in real-life settings."

But, she says, her research suggests that "slightly increasing the complexity of the vocabulary or font used in descriptions of a service or job titles or staff credentials can boost perceptions of effort or skill required and service value."

"In retail settings, subtle manipulations of processing difficulty might already be successfully at work," she notes. "Dim lights, hard-to-read menu fonts, and long and convoluted dish names are frequently used in fine dining restaurants."

The authors' study, "When Disfluency Signals Competence: The Effect of Processing Difficulty on Perceptions of Service Agents," has been published in the *Journal of Marketing Research*.

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