

Defining consumer misbehaviour

June 10 2014, by Sandra Hutchinson



QUT researcher Paula Dootson looks at how consumers behave.

Is grazing on grapes at the supermarket, stealing? Is forgetting your Go Card but still riding the train, wrong? Is returning a dress that has only been worn once, okay?

QUT researcher Paula Dootson, from QUT Business School, has studied the ongoing problem of consumer misbehavior and said while many people find these actions trivial, to businesses left short-changed it was a costly problem that was difficult to prevent.

"Consumer misbehaviour, is a behaviour that is against the law, a regulation or violates the generally accepted norms of appropriate conduct," Ms Dootson said.

But where do people draw the line?

"As a society we can agree on the polar opposites - what is acceptable and what isn't, but when it comes to everything in between the line blurs on what is right and what is wrong," Ms Dootson said.

She said in a survey where consumers were asked to rank behaviours in order of acceptability, it was surprising that two of the top five acceptable behaviours were illegal.

"It is not surprising that people differentiate between the neutral behaviour of using a four-cent per litre petrol voucher and the illegal behaviour of using a stolen credit card to order goods over the internet," she said.

"What is surprising, is even though it is against the law, people ranked creating a fake US iTunes account to access and pay for content not in Australia as the second most acceptable [consumer behaviour](#).

"Other behaviours that were ranked in the top five acceptable behaviours were paying for two people to stay in a holiday apartment when there were really four, to save money, or lying when returning merchandise to a store and claiming it was a gift when it was not."

Ms Dootson said customer theft accounted for 45 per cent of all losses incurred by organisations, and cost the retail industry \$1.86 billion in 2012-13.

"While the impact of illegal behaviours is easy to quantify, it is difficult to measure the effect of deviant but not illegal consumer behaviours, such as lying," she said.

Ms Dootson's research also looked at what businesses could do to deter consumers from deviant behaviour.

"Current deterrence measures assume we are all rational beings, but we are not, and we don't always weigh up the costs and benefits of our actions," she said.

"What businesses need to do is tailor deterrence strategies that counter the justifications people use to convince themselves a behaviour is acceptable.

"For example, attacking people's justification that it is acceptable to graze on grapes at the supermarket because 'everyone else does it', or 'it isn't hurting anyone', or 'I won't get caught'," she said.

"If businesses can convince consumers that their misbehaviour is hurting someone, is not normal practice, or is morally wrong then consumers are more likely to change their bad habits."

How people ranked consumer behaviours based on acceptability (1 = most acceptable, 10 = least acceptable)

1. Using the 4 cent a litre fuel voucher from the grocery store to buy petrol
2. Creating a fake US iTunes account to access and pay for content not available in Australia - illegal
3. Returning merchandise to a store by claiming it was a gift when it was not
4. Saying there are two people staying in a holiday apartment when there are really four - organisational policy violation
5. Illegally downloading TV shows from the internet for free, for personal consumption
6. Lying about a child's age in order to get a lower price - organisational policy violation

7. Not saying anything when the waitress miscalculates the bill in your favour
8. Evading a fare on public transport - illegal
9. Reporting a lost item as 'stolen' to an insurance company to collect the money - illegal
10. Using a stolen credit cards to order goods over the internet - illegal

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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