

Privacy, please: Why surveilling shoppers can inhibit sales, and how to fix it

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No shopper likes being watched closely, especially if they're buying an

item they find very personal and potentially embarrassing - for instance, foot fungus cream or hemorrhoid cream. Three marketing professors recently conducted research on this phenomenon and concluded that the problem is real and is relatively easy for retailers to address.

In "I'll Be Watching You: Shoppers' Reactions to Perceptions of Being Watched by Employees," Carol L. Esmark and Michael J. Breazeale of Mississippi State University and Stephanie M. Noble of the University of Tennessee attribute the reluctance of shoppers to make a sensitive purchase under watchful eyes to reactance theory, which explains that when shoppers feel that their [privacy](#) or freedom of behavior is threatened, they will back off, either permanently or temporarily. Retailers must balance their need to control shoplifting with their customers' need for privacy. The article is forthcoming in the September issue of the *Journal of Retailing*.

The authors designed a series of studies and field experiments that tested shoppers' reaction to being watched while shopping for foot fungal cream and hemorrhoid [cream](#). A researcher dressed as a retail employee purposely made eye contact - or not - as customers were surveying the shelves for these items. When [eye contact](#) was made, almost two thirds of the customers abandoned the purchase; when it was not made, nearly three quarters completed the buy.

In further studies, the authors tested solutions that would ease customers' concerns over privacy and yet be easy to implement for retailers - for instance, providing a shopping basket or opaque bag to hide the embarrassing selection. Based on their observations, the authors concluded that retailers who were able to provide shoppers with at least some privacy - even a shopping basket - could circumvent shoppers' perceptions of being watched and made so uncomfortable that they walked away empty-handed.

More information: Carol L. Esmark et al, I'll Be Watching You: Shoppers' Reactions to Perceptions of Being Watched by Employees, *Journal of Retailing* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jretai.2017.04.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretai.2017.04.005)

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