

Squaring the circle: Merchandising embarrassing products

March 5 2018

Buying an intimate personal care product can be embarrassing, especially if the act is observed by acquaintances or perfect strangers. From selecting the product to carrying it to a register, to placing it on the counter in full view of the checkout line...the experience can be excruciating. New research shows how packagers and retailers can make such in-store purchases easier for the typical self-conscious shopper.

Mississippi State University Professors Carol Esmark Jones and Adam Farmer, along with doctoral student Christian Barney, conducted five studies and found that packaging shapes and colors of embarrassing products as well as where the products are placed in stores make a difference in how likely shoppers are to follow through on purchase intentions. Additionally, promotions such as coupons can take the edge off the embarrassment in encouraging people to purchase. The research, "Appreciating Anonymity: An Exploration of Embarrassing Products and the Power of Blending In," is forthcoming in the March issue of the *Journal of Retailing*.

In one particularly intriguing study, 44 participants wore [virtual reality headsets](#) to navigate a virtual drugstore in search of hemorrhoid cream, passing a couple of actors who were added for realism but not placed in the hemorrhoid cream aisle. The video then stopped before a shelf with two differently packaged creams, a blue box and a red tube, and the participant was asked to choose one. They selected the blue box over the red tube by a factor of 2 to 1.

This result confirmed and extended the preceding studies, which controlled strictly for package color and shape: blue was preferred over red and a box was preferred to a tube. Subsequent studies showed that displaying the product on an endcap, versus in an aisle, inhibited [purchase](#), but that discount coupons or other promotions had a mitigating effect.

For manufacturers, the packaging implications are clear: avoid flashy, go for subtle. For retailers, ceding this market to online retailers isn't sensible; many such purchases are for immediate need. The authors suggest placing embarrassing products in less traveled parts of the store or providing shopping bags or baskets that help hide the product.

More information: Carol L. Esmark Jones et al, Appreciating Anonymity: An Exploration of Embarrassing Products and the Power of Blending In, *Journal of Retailing* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jretai.2018.01.001](#)

Provided by New York University

Citation: Squaring the circle: Merchandising embarrassing products (2018, March 5) retrieved 27 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-03-squaring-circle-merchandising-products.html>

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