

How a shopping trip becomes a guilt trip—and then a vicious cycle

December 4 2019, by Aria Bracci



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The timing of Giving Tuesday, coined "a global generosity movement," is ideal. Monday having already been claimed (by online retailers, in the form of Cyber Monday), the Tuesday after Thanksgiving is the closest

charitable organizations can get to the fallout of all the spending over the weekend, catching consumers—and their wallets—when they need redemption most.

Charities can thank a phenomenon called "moral balancing," says Alexander DePaoli, associate teaching professor of marketing at Northeastern. Moral balancing describes shoppers being "more likely to jump at an opportunity to demonstrate—both to the world and to themselves—how good they really are after they have done something indulgent," says DePaoli.

The catch, he says, is that "this phenomenon also works in reverse." Donating to a [food bank](#) may subsequently trigger indulgent spending, just as indulgent spending triggered the urge to donate in the first place. In this case, he says, "moral balancing" becomes known as "moral licensing."

Currently, Small Business Saturday, in which people are encouraged to shop locally the day after Black Friday, serves a similar psychological function to Giving Tuesday. This weekend designation, DePaoli says, "gives consumers the chance to support their [local businesses](#), which many Americans see as a moral thing to do."

And, as the Sunday after Thanksgiving is as yet unclaimed as a consumer "holiday," DePaoli points out that this is yet another opportunity to engage with [consumers'](#) sense of moral duty. "I'd argue that if a company wanted to keep interest high all through the weekend, it would be an ideal time to have a Sustainable Sunday, when all of the environmentally friendly and ethically sourced products go on sale," he says.

But, as DePaoli points out, someone riding the wave of a charitable gift, a visit to a mom-and-pop store, or the purchase of a reusable water bottle is actually being primed to boomerang.

"They have demonstrated that they are a 'good' person," says DePaoli, "and now feel that they have earned the right to a little indulgence."

This, like other consumer trends, is something companies can use to their advantage. In fact, says DePaoli, the trick to upping sales in early December might just be identifying future customers and urging them to participate in an occasion like Giving Tuesday.

As moral licensing shows, they'll come around.

Provided by Northeastern University

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