

Eyebuy: Sweeping glances can cost you money

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Unplanned purchases are an important profit source for retailers.

Because looking at products is always the first step in making a purchase decision, retailers apply various strategies in order to bring shoppers in juxtaposition with the store assortment. "Over the past decades, retailers have developed many sales strategies that focus on the visual attention of customers," says Mathias Streicher from the Institute for Strategic Management, Marketing and Tourism at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. "A popular strategy, for example, is to place product categories such as milk in the back of a store."

Customers in need for everyday products therefore have to travel further into the store, which naturally brings other products into the view of shoppers as they travel to stock their needs. Discount campaigns can also be used to lure customers into less frequented store areas. "All these strategies maximize the journey through the store and increase the probability to remember a forgotten need or discover a new product," says marketing expert Mathias Streicher. Together with Zachary Estes from the Cass Business School in London and Oliver Büttner from the University of Duisburg-Essen, Streicher investigated in several lab- and field studies how attention contributes to exploratory [shopping](#) and unplanned purchasing.

Attention can be easily influenced

"In looking at shelves shoppers always see a subset of the assortment and which subset they see critically depends on their visual attention," says Streicher. "We were able to show that attentional patterns can be unconsciously broadened or even narrowed down by simple in-store communications."

For example, the researchers first manipulated the breadth of attention of volunteering participants in a mini-market on the university campus in Innsbruck, Austria, with the help of digital displays, which are now also widely used as advertising media in stores. For a broad focus, different

images were shown randomly and consecutively on the left or right periphery of the screen, while for a narrow focus the same images appeared always in the middle.

The participants were then equipped with mobile eye tracking glasses and placed in front of a candy shelf from which they were to select products. Those persons who were previously presented with images at the periphery of the screen looked at significantly more areas of the candy shelf than the control group, who were presented the same images in the middle of the screen.

In a second study in a supermarket, the researchers equipped the customers with pedometers to measure their in-store travel. Here too, they were shown product images on a display before shopping. While those customers whose attention was narrowly focused walked approximately 240 meters in the [store](#), customers with broad attention walked over 300 meters. Significantly, the proportion of [unplanned purchases](#) in customers' shopping carts doubled. "We show that a very simple intervention before shopping can have consequences for a person's shopping behavior," says Streicher, summing up the results of the study, which has now been published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Better manage shopping habits

The results of the study not only make a valuable contribution to consumer research, but also offer interesting findings for practical use. Thus, the research work gives indications, how contents of communication on digital advertising media should be arranged, in order to positively affect purchase behavior. On the other hand, the research also offers recommendations for people who want to better control their purchasing behavior. "Our research shows that unplanned purchasing already begins at the level of visual attention," says Innsbruck-based

consumer researcher, who also has a simple tip for customers: "To reduce unplanned purchases, it is therefore better to avoid wandering glances in shopping situations—preferably with the support of a shopping list."

More information: Mathias C Streicher et al, Exploratory Shopping: Attention Affects In-store Exploration and Unplanned Purchasing, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucaa054](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucaa054)

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