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Delivering 'serendipity': Seemingly random product discovery, aided by technology

May 25 2021

Researchers from University of Sydney, University of Florida, and Rutgers University published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that examines the role of serendipity in customer satisfaction and how marketers can provide it.

The study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing*, is titled "Serendipity: Chance Encounters in the Marketplace Enhance Consumer Satisfaction" and is authored by Aekyoung Kim, Felipe Affonso, Juliano Laran, and Kristina Durante.

Netflix knows you are tired of choice. The streaming service recently introduced what might be the perfect hack: a shuffle button that eliminates choice and plays a randomly selected program for the consumer. Under COVID-19 restrictions, the newly homebound were happy to have so many programming options, but this faded over time.

Recall a time when you heard a beloved song come across the radio or stumbled upon a favorite movie while channel surfing. These accidents become "happy" because they lead to feelings of serendipity, which our new research shows heighten enjoyment. When a product, service, or experience is positive, unexpected, and involving chance, our research team reasoned that this would generate congruent feelings. Consumers would feel that the encounter was a good surprise, make attributions to chance, and feel lucky that it happened—which we collectively call "feelings of serendipity." Using a series of experiments, we set out to test our contention that marketers can create serendipity in the marketplace.

Across multiple consumer domains (online subscription services, museums, movies, food consumption, and music), creating serendipity through positive, unexpected, chance encounters increased satisfaction, enjoyment, perceptions of meaningfulness, willingness to pay, willingness to recommend a service, and interest. For example, members of subscription box services (e.g., Birchbox, Stitchfix) enjoyed their assortment more when they received a random selection of products compared to members who made selections themselves. A similar phenomenon occurred during the researchers' curated experiments. For instance, they measured consumer satisfaction using two platforms; one delivering movie recommendations and another delivering music recommendations. As Kim explains, "Compared to a condition where consumers chose for themselves, enjoyment increased when consumers received a movie or song delivered at random from a set of alternatives we had previously selected. Increased enjoyment occurred because the seemingly randomly delivered product was thought to be a good surprise, attributed to chance and luck. In other words, serendipity was born."

This good news suggests that marketers can capitalize on the power of serendipity to increase consumer satisfaction. To do this, marketers must go beyond surprising consumers, because serendipity is not just a pleasant surprise. To test the depths of serendipity, the research team carefully removed one or more of the "ingredients" to see if the serendipity effect would go away. First, they found that when an encounter was negative, consumers no longer felt increased enjoyment. In fact, there was a boomerang effect. A negative encounter that was unexpected and attributed to chance was perceived to be even more negative.

Second, when they increased and decreased the degree of randomness, it exacerbated and attenuated serendipity. Consumers who viewed a movie trailer that was described as randomly selected from 100 possible options enjoyed it more than when it came from a menu of 10 options, which made it seem less random. Moreover, making consumers aware that a marketer was selecting the options also decreased serendipity and enjoyment, because now it was clear that someone was behind the curtain and the selection was not random.

Finally, they reasoned that educating consumers about a product or service would eliminate the serendipity effect. Affonso says that "Coming to learn more about a product not only eliminates unexpectedness (a key ingredient for serendipity), but can create a sense of expertise that leads consumers to think they have the knowledge to make better choices." In one experiment, they used a platform that recommends functional music that can enhance focus. Approximately half of the participants were provided with information on which attributes increase a song's ability to increase people's concentration. When consumers were educated this way, encountering music from the platform in a serendipitous way later on (via random chance) no longer enhanced enjoyment. This suggests that aficionados may not appreciate marketplace serendipity as much as the rest of us.

"In today's marketplace, which affords an abundance of choice, our research provides marketers with insights on how to build some magic into marketplace encounters," says Laran. When attempting to enhance serendipity, companies may sometimes want to increase perceptions that an encounter is the result of chance or randomness. For example, consumers may enjoy some unexpected events more as part of vacation packages or enjoy product samples that arrive randomly without a lot of information. Companies should also eliminate marketing communications that highlight the targeting process, avoiding telling consumers that a product was especially selected for them based on what the company knows about their preferences. In such instances, an attribution to chance is replaced by attribution to being watched and targeted by the company.

More information: Aekyoung Kim et al, Serendipity: Chance Encounters in the Marketplace Enhance Consumer Satisfaction, *Journal of Marketing* (2021). DOI: 10.1177/00222429211000344

Provided by American Marketing Association