

Shoppers more likely to buy on Pi Day and other 'special' day-themed promotions

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Call it "having their 'Pi' and buying too." A new study finds that consumers are more likely to make purchases during promotions tied to a special day, like Pi Day (March 14), than during regular holiday or non-distinctive day promotions.

Researchers describe their findings in a paper, "Promoting Pi Day: Consumer Response to Special Day-Themed Sales Promotions," published in the October 2022 print issue of the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

"We found that special day-themed sales [promotions](#) lead [consumers](#) to be more likely to use the [discounts](#) to make a purchase compared to the more standard promotions," said Daniel Zane, assistant professor of marketing at Lehigh University, who authored the paper with Rebecca Walker Reczek of The Ohio State University and Kelly Haws of Vanderbilt University.

"We also discovered that the positive consumer response to special day-themed promotions is essentially driven by consumers' rewarding marketers for their creativity in providing a way to celebrate the special day."

While many consumers associate discounts with traditional holidays and sales events such as Black Friday, Labor Day and Back to School, firms often now link discounts to "special days," novel holidays not historically associated with promotions.

Think pizza and pie promotions or 31.4% discounts for Pi Day, the annual celebration of the mathematical constant Pi (3.14...). Or sales on apparel, games or toys for Mario Day (MAR10) and Star Wars Day, May 4 (May the Fourth Be With You). Companies may tie promotions to National Ice Cream Day, National Dog Day, their founder's birthday or the anniversary of a customer's first purchase. Lands' End created its own special day when it launched National Swimsuit Day.

First research to explore special-day promotions

The proliferation of special day-themed promotions in the marketplace—including in [social media](#) and e-commerce—inspired the researchers to explore whether the companies using them were seeing a benefit, such as increased sales, new customers and more brand loyalty. They are the first to systematically study the effects of special day-themed sales promotions, and the study is the first to explore how

consumers' perceptions of marketers' creativity in linking promotions to special days can influence purchasing behavior.

Using field and laboratory studies, the researchers randomly showed participants one of two versions of a promotion, either a special day-themed promotion or a more traditional promotion, and assessed their intentions to use the discount to make a purchase. In one experiment, they found that consumers report being significantly more likely to make a purchase from a company when offered the National Picnic Day Sale, compared to the same discount framed as an Annual One Day Sale.

In another study, they partnered with a firm and found that consumers who received a 25% discount by email in celebration of the day that a company adopted its mascot dog were nearly twice as likely to click a link in the email to shop on the company's website compared to those who received an equivalent discount with no mention of the dog's special day. The effect held for national special days as well as special days more personal to an individual consumer, like the anniversary of their first purchase with the company.

Their findings show that consumers are more likely to respond favorably to a discount celebrating a special day compared to the same discount with no link to a special day. The key is that consumers must find the promotion to be both original and appropriate, Zane said. For example, a spa pedicure discount on National Barefoot Day, versus a discount on clothing in celebration of a national food day.

Creative, appropriate promotions drive engagement

When consumers see a high fit between a firm and a special day-themed promotion, the perceived creativity drives increased intentions to use the promotion, the researchers said. However, when consumers see a low fit—even with the positive influence of creativity—the perceived

inappropriateness "ultimately hurts purchase intentions enough to cancel out any positive effect of originality," they said.

It's known that more traditional sales promotions can generate negative thoughts about a firm because consumers assume marketers are just trying to persuade them to spend money, or they suspect the company is trying to unload old inventory, Zane said.

"Perhaps the most surprising aspect of this research was what we found to be the psychological driver of consumers' positive response to special day-themed promotions," he said. "They actually think about how the marketer who created the special day-themed promotion was creative in providing a way to celebrate the special day. In essence, consumers then reward marketers for their creativity by being more likely to use a special day discount to make a purchase from that company."

Knowing the impact that special day-themed sales promotions have on shopping behavior can benefit both marketers and consumers, Zane said. For marketers and businesses, there is promise for increased sales, new customers and more engagement tied to such promotions. "The findings suggest that linking a discount to a company-generated special day can positively impact real customer behavior," the researchers said. "It is possible that consumers who receive special day-themed discounts may feel they are unique or in an exclusive subset of consumers receiving the [promotion](#)."

With technology and availability of customer data, there are growing opportunities to create special days and promotions specific to a customer's interaction with a company, which may show additional potential, Zane said.

"For consumers, this work can perhaps help them reflect on the many hidden forces that shape our marketplace behaviors," he said. "Being

aware of this might help curb unnecessary or impulsive purchases."

More information: Daniel M. Zane et al, Promoting Pi Day: Consumer Response to Special Day-Themed Sales Promotions, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1271](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1271)

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