Consumer beware: Rejecting an option may make you more likely to choose it later

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People make purchasing decisions by choosing between alternatives or by rejecting certain options. But a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* finds that focusing on ruling out an option can lead consumers to reverse their preferences.

"Consider the decision to purchase an iPhone or a Blackberry," write authors Juliano Laran (University of Miami) and Keith Wilcox (Babson College). "If a consumer prefers a business phone, a choice task would lead her to purchase a Blackberry. In this research we demonstrate that rejecting alternatives makes consumers more likely to select preference-inconsistent options. Thus, if a consumer prefers a business phone, a rejection task would lead her to purchase an iPhone."

Why does this happen? When consumers reject alternatives, they need to decide which alternative they do not want, so they focus on options that are less preferred in order to assess if they should reject those options. This shift of focus makes them more likely to notice appealing features.

"Such situations are very common in marketing. Consumers may want a nice apartment but still want to save money; they may want a fast car but still care about safety; they may want healthy food, but still desire tasty food," the authors write. Along that line, even though a consumer may prefer a business phone, she is more likely to purchase the iPhone when she "rejects" it because the process of rejecting increases her focus on the appealing nonbusiness features of the iPhone.

In one study, participants who said they would prefer an apartment closer to nightlife to a less-expensive one further from nightlife were told to select an apartment to "reject." "Simply instructing them to decide which one they would like to 'reject' makes them more likely to choose the less-expensive apartment," the authors write. And when they were primed to prefer the less-expensive apartment, participants selected the apartment closer to nightlife.

"Regardless of whether participants prefer the apartment closer to nightlife or the less-expensive apartment when they choose, having them reject reverses preference," the authors explain.

More information: Juliano Laran and Keith Wilcox. "Choice, Rejection, and Elaboration on Preference-Inconsistent Alternatives." Journal of Consumer Research: August 2011 (published online February 1, 2011). Further information: ejcr.org

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