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What happens in your brain when you shop?

Megan Scheillier

Have you ever wondered what type of tricks retail stores use to entice consumers to spend their money? Maybe you have questioned whether there are psychological reasons behind your buying habits or not. Well, I have the answers.

"Use cash. Studies have shown that people spend more money when they pay with a credit card," Dr. Ahmed Maamoun, who is a marketing professor at UMD, said as he sat behind his desk that was scattered with marketing textbooks. "Physically handing over cash triggers pain receptors in the brain- so you will *really think* before spending it."

Emma Shake, a UMD student and self-proclaimed shopaholic, agreed to the statement when asked: Do you think that you tend to buy more when you pay with your credit card versus when you pay with cash?

"Yes because it is easier to avoid how much money is on your card," Shake said. "Plus you can go over the amount on your card, but you can't do that with cash."

Many people often fall into the traps that retail stores set for their consumers. Here are some easy tips on how to save money while also avoiding the psychological traps that retail stores are setting you up for.

In an article titled, "The Excitement of Getting a Bargain," George Loewenstein, professor of economics and psychology at Carnegie Mellon University, explains that people who spend a lot of money in irresponsible ways may not register the feeling of pain that is supposed to go off in one's brain when they spend money. On the other hand, Loewenstein goes on further to explain that a typical "cheapskate" feels the pain of paying for things in a more heightened way than most.

Think about how stores attract *you*—the consumers. There are nearly endless ways that retail stores attract their customers; some tactics are more obvious, while others are geared to psychologically trick consumers.

Jena Repichowski, store manager of Francesca's Collections at Miller Hill Mall, said "Enticing buyers with new deals and also just changing up our sales, weekly, are some ways we try to draw in customers."

Repichowski explained how Francesca's Collections, and many other retail stores, offer new and different deals throughout the week in order to captivate consumers. For example, the store she works at offers new weekly deals such as: buy a piece of jewelry and get the second piece 50% off and 20% off of regular priced shoes.

In the same article, Loewenstein further discusses that when consumers feel that they are responsible for finding deals and discounts, they are more likely to purchase something.

You may recall how retail-store employees often try to tell you how much money you are saving, or could possibly save, if you buy certain items.

This is because the likelihood of a consumer buying the product after they visualize how much money they will *save* often triggers something that Loewenstein refers to as "smartshopper feelings." This is essentially an excited feeling in one's brain when they receive a deal.

"Classic tools still work," Maamoun said in regards to how retail stores attract customers. "Like coupons, loyalty programs, and buy one get one free tactics."

Retail stores use many of the typical, old school ways to attract consumers. It is clear that these tactics of using special promotions and discounts to make the consumer feel that they are *saving* money will still continue to be successful as time goes on.

Overall, there are many tips and tricks that stores are not telling you. However, I hope that this article made you more aware of the psychological tricks retail stores play on consumers.

Perhaps the best tip is the last piece of advice Prof. Maamoun offered:

"Try to overcome the stereotype that products can make you happy."

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