

Science of Shopping

¹ Sixty-five percent of men who take jeans into a fitting room of a store will buy them, but only 25% of women will do that.

² Four percent of people shopping for computers on a Saturday morning will buy one, compared to 21% who will buy one after 5 p.m.

³ Eight percent of shoppers in a store that sells houseware use shopping baskets. Also, 75% of the people who use a basket will, in fact, buy something, as opposed to 34% of the shoppers who don't use a basket.

⁴ Information about customers' shopping patterns like those that are described above can help store owners make decisions that improve the sales in their stores. To encourage shoppers to buy more products, market researchers are interested in the science of shopping. This science can tell store owners how to design signs that will attract customers and where to place those signs so that people will really read them. It will describe how to make customers feel more comfortable in stores and how to place products in places that they can easily reach. Research shows that the more comfortable customers feel, the longer they will stay in a store, and the longer they stay in a store, the more products they will buy.

⁵ In his book, *Why We Buy*, Paco Underhill describes how he studied what customers do in stores and how he was able to use this information to make stores more effective at selling their products.

⁶ To study customers' habits, Underhill employs shopper trackers. A tracker secretly observes a shopper and writes down details about that person. Good trackers know how to simultaneously observe a

shopper and take notes. They can tell if someone is reading a sign or looking at themselves in a mirror next to the sign. Perhaps the most important skill that they have is to know how close they can stand near a subject (customer) without the subject noticing them. If subjects think that someone is watching them, then they won't behave naturally. Underhill has found that to secretly observe a customer, it's a bad idea to stand behind them. Most people will have a feeling that someone is watching them. However, if we stand to the side of the shopper, he or she might notice us but think that we are just another shopper and hardly notice what we are doing.

⁷ The trackers start by making a detailed map of the store. When they start following and observing a subject (which means "tracking a customer"), they use a shorthand code to record (in a notebook) details about that subject. For example:

⁸ . . . a bald, bearded man in a red sweater and blue jeans entered the department store on a Saturday at 11:07 a.m., walked directly to a first-floor display of wallets, picked up or otherwise touched a total of twelve of them, checked the price tag on four, then chose one, moved at 11:16 to a nearby tie rack, stroked seven ties, read the content tags on all seven, read the price on two, then bought none and went directly to the cashier to pay. Oh, wait, he paused for a moment at a mannequin and examined the price tag on the jacket that it wore . . . he entered the cashier line at 11:23 as the third person in line, waited two

minutes and fifty-one seconds to get to the register, paid with a credit card and exited the store at 11:30 (15)

⁹ Before using trackers to analyze what shoppers do in a store, most store owners merely looked at the information from their cash registers, which tells what products were bought and the time that they were purchased. According to Underhill, the cash register information only presents a partial picture of what is happening in a store. For example, he researched a large bookstore which had recently put a large table with discounted books at the front of the store. As customers entered the store, these discounted books were the first thing that they saw, and almost all of them stopped to browse the books, and many of them bought at least one book. At the end of the day, the store owner saw the large sale of these books (from the cash register information) and was happy with the results. However, when trackers observed the customers, they found that this discount-priced table was not necessarily a good idea. They found that many of the customers who entered the store, went to the discount table but then didn't continue to walk through the rest of the store. When there was no discount-priced table, customers spent more time walking through the aisles in the store and perhaps bought more regular-priced books. Obviously, this is the type of information that a cash register cannot tell us.

¹⁰ In another example, the owner of a drugstore in a mall felt that his store was quite successful, based on the amount of money that the cash registers showed. However, Underhill noticed that "the closure rate" for aspirins was lower than expected. In other words, the percentage of customers who looked at bottles of aspirin and actually bought them was low.

¹¹ For three days, the owner videotaped the aspirin shelves and discovered the reason. The aspirin section was on the main aisle of the store. Most shoppers who enter the drugstore tend to walk down the main aisle on their way to other parts of the store, so it seemed logical that aspirin would sell well in such a busy place. Nevertheless, Underhill (the researcher) found that this location actually was a disadvantage. This is because many of the customers who were shopping for aspirin were senior citizens, and they often spent some time looking at the different brands before deciding which one to buy. At the same time, other customers, often teenagers, rushed down the main aisle past the senior citizens on their way to the cold-drink section, which was at the far end of the store. Many of these teenagers were employees at other stores in the mall, and they were in a hurry to get a cold drink during their 10-minute breaks. The videotape showed that the senior citizens frequently had to move aside so that the teenagers could hurry past them, and many of these elderly shoppers looked irritated by this. When Underhill timed these elderly customers, he found that they didn't spend as much time in the aspirin section as the owner expected.

¹² From this research, Underhill recommended that the drugstore move the soft drinks toward the front of the store and move the aspirin to a quieter corner. With this new arrangement, because fewer customers walked past the aspirin in that quiet corner, you might imagine that there would be fewer purchases of aspirin. However, sales of aspirin, in fact, rose by 15 percent.

¹³ ¹ Underhill noticed a similar phenomenon at a clothing store. ² The manager placed a tie rack near the entrance of the store and along the main aisle. ³ Videotape of the store entrance during busy times showed

customers stopping at the tie rack.

⁴ However, as more customers entered, they accidentally bumped into the shoppers who were looking at the ties. ⁵ After a few of these encounters, the shoppers who were looking at the ties would give up and move away from the rack in order to avoid being bumped. ⁶ Underhill describes this as “the butt-brush factor.” ⁷ He found that customers, and especially women, don’t like to be brushed from behind and will actually leave a section of a store that they were interested in, just to avoid that situation.

⁸ Needless to say, the sales of ties from that rack were lower than the manager had expected. ⁹ After Underhill explained his observations to the manager, the rack was shifted to an aisle that was less busy, and the sales jumped.

¹⁴ Managers need to study not only where to put products in their stores but also what shelves to put them on. Trackers were studying customers in a pet food aisle of a store. Their research showed that although adult customers bought dog food, children and senior citizens were the shoppers who bought treats for dogs. This made sense because many elderly people treat their dogs as if they were their children, and young children enjoy giving treats to their pet dogs. In the store that was studied in this research, the dog treats were stocked on the top shelves. The trackers noticed that small children were climbing the shelves to reach the treats and elderly shoppers were trying to knock some down with a pole. As a result of this research, the manager moved the treats to a lower shelf, and the sales of the dog treats went up.

¹⁵ An important factor in marketing is the closure rate (as mentioned in paragraph 10), which is the percentage of customers who enter a store and buy something. Naturally, store owners want to have closure rates as close to 100% as possible, but expected rates

depend on the type of store. In a supermarket, the rate is close to 100%, but in an art gallery which sells very expensive paintings, it might be only 1%. A goal for any store is to train their employees and market their products in a way that will make every shopper become a buyer. According to Underhill, “. . . the amount of time a shopper spends in a store . . . is perhaps the single most important factor in determining how much she or he will buy” (37). Therefore, the challenge is to make a store so appealing and comfortable for customers that they want to spend a long time in it.

¹⁶ ¹ Trackers found that non-buyers in an electronics store spend only 5 minutes and 6 seconds in the store, compared to “buying customers” who spent 9 minutes and 29 seconds. ² In a toy store, the non-buyers spent 10 minutes, whereas the buyers spend 17 minutes.

¹⁷ ¹ One effective way to get customers to spend more time in a store is to make sure that they have some contact with the store’s employees. ² Underhill claims that the more contact that a shopper has with a store’s employees, the greater chance there is that the customer will buy something.

¹⁸ ¹ In a study of a clothing store, it was found that only 25% of the customers had any contact with an employee. ² This meant that most of the customers were probably wandering around the store looking for items on their own or looking for someone to ask for help. ³ It also meant that the employees were spending most of their time putting products on shelves or working at the cash registers, rather than talking to customers about the products and making sales. ⁴ Needless to say, this store was underperforming.

¹⁹ The “wait time” at a cash register is another important factor in making customers feel comfortable. In fact, Underhill believes that it is the “most important factor in customer satisfaction” (38). If a customer starts to go into a store and immediately notices a long line of people at the cash register, there is a good chance that that shopper will just turn around and leave. Underhill video taped a woman who spent 22 minutes shopping in a store. After putting the products that she wanted to buy in a cart, she got in line for a cashier. Time passed as she waited in line, and finally she gave up and walked away from her cart and left the store without making a purchase.

²⁰ ¹ The entrance to a store is another important area that researchers study. ² Many store managers will put “for sale” signs or displays of merchandise at the entrance to catch shoppers’ attention as they enter the store. ³ However, Underhill found that most shoppers do not notice these. ⁴ He claims that at the exact entrance to the store, the shoppers are not really in the store. ⁵ Their eyes are adjusting to the change in light from outside to inside and it takes a few seconds for them to feel as if they are actually in the store. ⁶ This means that the transition zone at the entrance is not a good place to have important signs, special merchandise—or even shopping baskets—because shoppers tend to just walk past them without noticing them. ⁷ On the other hand, if the signs, merchandise, and shopping baskets are moved just 10 feet inside, there is a greater chance that shoppers will notice them.

²¹ A videotape of a store which had shopping baskets at the entrance found that only 10% of the customers picked up one. The videotape also showed that “basket-less” shoppers were walking around the store trying to carry items in their arms.

Obviously, this limited the amount of products that they would buy. To improve this situation, employees were encouraged to offer a basket to any shopper who was carrying products in their hands. As a result, more shoppers began to use baskets, and the average sale per customer increased.

²² To improve the sales at a newsstand at a busy train station, Underhill videotaped it. The newsstand store owner believed that it was best to have as much merchandise (newspapers, magazines, candy, gum, and cigarettes) displayed. Surprisingly, there was too much merchandise. The videotape showed that people were rushing from the trains to their work in the morning and from their work to catch a train to go home in the late afternoon. Most of these commuters were carrying briefcases, purses or lunch bags. When they approached the newsstand, there was no place for them to put these while they got out their money to make purchase because there was no space on the counter. All the space was taken with merchandise displays. As a result, the customers had to balance their various bags in one hand and search for their money with the other. This took a lot of extra time, which caused a line up at the newsstand while other customers waited. Because of this, many shoppers who were in a hurry decided to go to a different newsstand.

²³ To improve this situation, Underhill recommended that the newsstand owner display less merchandise and, instead, put in a small shelf where customers could put their things while getting out their money. Thanks to this counter space, they were able to make their purchases more quickly, which made the line shorter, which encouraged more shoppers to buy something from the newsstand.

²⁴ The most important lesson that we can learn from the science of shopping is

“Amenability and profitability are totally inextricably linked” (44). If a store can find out what makes customers comfortable, they

can greatly improve their ability to sell their products.