

Stanford Business School Research Examines: Do Samples Whet or Dampen Consumer Appetites?

2008-08-20

Every grocery store knows that a hungry shopper is likely to buy more. On the other side are product marketers who would love to stuff customers with samples of specific items to obtain converts to their brands. Retailers worry: Could food and product sampling sate hunger-and with it, the desire to fill the grocery basket?

As reported in today's Stanford Knowledgebase, Baba Shiv, professor of marketing at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, has found evidence that product sampling in fact can do what a good French appetizer is intended to do: whet the appetite for more-even in someone who was not hungry to begin with. Not only can sampling stimulate the desire for more of the same product-cheese, soda, or what have you-but it can also spark an overall desire for anything pleasurable, be it other foodstuffs or even seemingly unrelated things, such as exotic vacations and spa experiences. Such a phenomenon is likely, then, to stimulate buying.

In a series of four studies, Shiv and colleagues Monica Wadhwa, a doctoral candidate at Stanford Business School, and Stephen Nowlis of Arizona State University gave one group of students small samples of a sweet drink or chocolate, and another group nothing, before having them settle down to watch a film in a room with a selection of readily available food or drink items.

Those who had been 'cued' with the samples consistently ate and drank more during the film than those who hadn't. 'We showed that the intuition that sampling satisfies needs, and therefore decreases the appetite for more, is wrong,' Shiv said. 'In fact, sampling stimulates the desire for more.'

One study also indicated that presenting people with a good-tasting sample may activate a general motivation for anything rewarding. Those offered a sweet drink sample not only drank more soda during the film, but also afterward indicated a stronger desire for a series of consumer goods and experiences. The effect was the greatest for pleasure-oriented items. Participants' reported desire for more decadent things like chocolate cake and a vacation in Bora Bora, for example, was influenced by whether they had taken the sample drink.

Working off the hunch that brain chemistry might be at play, at the start of this particular study Shiv and his colleagues rated people on the behavior activation system (BAS) scale, a self-assessed measure of one's tendency to 'go for what one wants.' 'We hypothesized that people with high BAS measurements were probably more prone to pleasure-seeking, which has been found to correlate with activation in the dopamine systems of the brain,' Shiv said.

Sure enough, test-subjects who scored higher on the BAS scale consumed the most soda, led by those given the sweet drink sample beforehand. When asked afterward to rate their desire for several consumer products and experiences, these same participants also recorded the highest overall ratings.

Could pleasant odors also activate people's desire for rewards? Yes, said the investigators. In a final study, they found that participants who sniffed a good-smelling substance (scented spray) drank more soda than those who sniffed a neutral-smelling substance (water)-and far more than those who sniffed a bad-smelling compound (ammonia). 'Retailers who spray perfumes or have enticing food smells in their store seem to know instinctively the value of scent in triggering people's pleasure seeking,' Shiv said.

One noteworthy finding was that once the whetted appetite is sated, the effects of taste or odor samples don't linger. The marketing implication is that customers who taste a morsel of cheese may reward themselves quickly by buying something luxurious, like a scented candle, and be done with it-no overflowing grocery cart there. Retailers, Shiv suggests, therefore may want to set up sample stations at strategic locations within a store to keep stimulating in customers the urge to indulge themselves.

Overall, however, the results of the studies suggest that stores can't go wrong by making samples available. An ounce of mango salsa may turn out to be worth a pound of caviar.

(This story reports on research at the Stanford Graduate School of Business and appears in today's Stanford Knowledgebase, the free monthly information source for thoughts, ideas and research at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. For related research citations and to dig deeper, visit www.gsb.stanford.edu/news/knowledgebase.html.)

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