



Are You An Impulse Shopper?

Contact: [Lori Wright](#)
603-862-0574
UNH Media Relations

December 19, 2007

EDITORS AND REPORTERS: Chuck Martin can be reached at (603) 750-3020 and cln6@unh.edu.

DURHAM, N.H. – As the Christmas shopping season moves into its final days, new research from the University of New Hampshire shows that certain shoppers who exhibit distinct cognitive skills are more apt to be impulse buyers.

“Observable Cognitive Function in the Purchasing Process: A Study of Quickly Identifying Impulse Buying Behaviors in Consumers” was conducted by students in adjunct professor Chuck Martin’s class at the Whittemore School of Business and Economics.

The students found that shoppers who exhibit high levels of flexibility or low levels of self-restraint are most likely to make an impulse buy. The students theorize that salespeople can be trained to spot these cognitive skills in shoppers, thus improving their ability to help customers and increase the salesperson’s efficiency and effectiveness.

“The researchers found that these impulse and non-impulse behaviors in shoppers can be identified in less than a minute, which could instantly indicate to a salesperson who is most likely to listen to their sales advice and who is not,” Martin said.

Flexibility and self-restraint are two of a dozen cognitive functions known as executive skills. People high in flexibility are able to revise plans in the face of obstacles, setbacks, new information, or mistakes. They are highly adaptable to changing conditions. People high in self-restraint have the ability to think before they act. They can resist the urge to say or do something to allow time to evaluate the situation and how a behavior might affect it.

The students found that highly flexible customers browse extensively and tend to walk around the store. They are not loyal to any one brand. They are open to suggestions from sales associates and easily persuaded to purchase the generic, less-costly version of the item or even to trade up. If the customers can’t find the product they want to purchase, they tend to purchase another similar product.

Consumers with low-self restraint randomly look at products, walking through the aisles grabbing different items. They appear distracted or scattered, picking up items without a pattern. Sometimes they will pick up an item, put it back, then go back and get it for purchase. Sales are very attractive to these consumers, whether or not they planned to purchase the item – they are the true impulse buyer.

These consumers often exhibit the “oohh” factor. For example, during the study, students

observed a male shopper at Best Buy in line ready to check out. Upon noticing the discounted DVD rack, he immediately said "oohh" and approached the rack to sort through his options. He wound up purchasing four discounted DVDs.

On the other hand, salespeople would be wise to not invest their time with customers who are highly self-restrained. They are not enticed by sales or salespeople. They may browse extensively and comparison shop, but will leave the store empty handed if they don't find exactly what they want.

Inflexible customers may be the most difficult for salespeople, since they can be openly difficult and stubborn. These customers are "on a mission" – they know what they want and walk directly to the department of the store with the item. If it's not available, they will turn around and walk out.

Fifty students divided into teams of 10 conducted their research at businesses throughout the New Hampshire Seacoast. The research consisted of observations of shopping behavior, followed by short surveys designed to validate the cognitive functions of self-restraint or flexibility associated with the observed behavior. In 95 percent of the cases, the observed behavior was validated by the survey results.

