

Shoppers more likely to buy from attractive salespeople

If you've ever noticed some stores only have exceptionally good looking employees, it may be because the owners are on to something: people want to buy more from them. Now researchers have proven there's science to back up that perception.

"We found that if a shirt had been touched by someone who is highly attractive and of the opposite gender, the shoppers evaluated the products higher and they're willing to drop more money on it," said University of Alberta Business Professor Jennifer Argo, who studied responses from 300 people.

Titled Positive Consumer Contagion: Responses to Attractive Others in a Retail Context, the study will appear in the Journal of Consumer Research. It is the first research to identify and document 'positive contagion' as a shopping phenomenon.

In a previous study, Argo found people were less likely to purchase an item if they knew it had been touched by anyone else, and often a discounted price was necessary.

"That research showed that products are seen to be contaminated if they're thought to have been touched by others, that they carry cooties, germs or some sort of negative essence, even if they're not visibly dirty," she said.

But Argo and professors Darren Dahl, from the University of British Columbia, and Andrea Morales, from Arizona State University, wanted to see if there were ever instances where contact, or contagion, could have a positive effect on the goods for sale.

The first part of the study involved sending men and women to a store to try on a specific unisex shirt. The experimenter called a colleague acting as a salesperson at the store ahead of time to notify them when a participant was to arrive.

When the participant showed a picture of the shirt to the salesperson, they were told the last one was being tried on by another shopper currently in the change room - half the time someone with average looks and half the time a hired model. When the change room was vacated, the participant - who had seen the person exit the change room - could then try on the shirt and return to the study base to complete an evaluation.

"If the shopper was of average attractiveness, the participant evaluated the shirt negatively. But if it was the opposite gender and they were highly attractive, the participants were willing to pay more," said Jennifer.

"The results show that it's worth having highly attractive people work there. Or if you can't, at least have the staff dress well and be well-groomed and maximize their potential."

In the second part of the study, the researchers examined why the evaluations were different, but used only male participants and female salespeople, again half of average attractiveness and half models. The men were sent to try on a shirt, but this time the salesperson told them that she had worn it on her prior shift.

Sometimes, the salesperson showed the item in a dry-cleaning bag, but the other half of the time it was on a hanger, implying it hadn't been cleaned.

They were later asked to evaluate how much they would pay for the shirt, how much they liked it, the likelihood of purchasing the product and how desirable it was to them.

"The dirty shirt rated higher for the men when the salesperson was highly attractive," said Argo. "It's like

they were trying to get her essence."

The results were only slightly surprising, she said, pointing to retailer Abercrombie and Fitch, which has a reputation for only hiring attractive staff. At the company's Phoenix location, Argosaw a shirtless male model posing at the door, as a lure for women shoppers.

"But then they had beautiful women working inside also. They think having highly attractive people is preferential and this study supports it totally. They're very successful and it's due to something that is not just the product."

Source: University of Alberta

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