

Are you feeling lucky? How superstition impacts consumer choice

Despite their strong impact on the marketplace, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the how superstitious beliefs impact decision making. A groundbreaking new study from the April issue of the Journal of Consumer Research examines the role of lucky and unlucky features and finds that consumers are more disappointed when a product that is supposedly “lucky” breaks. Additionally, even thinking about a “negative” superstition can make consumers more risk averse.

“Despite the large impact that superstitious beliefs have on the marketplace, we currently know very little about their implications for consumer judgment and decision making,” explain Thomas Kramer and Lauren Block (Baruch College).

They continue: “This research is one of the first to investigate the impact of irrational beliefs on consumer behavior in the marketplace.”

Between \$800 and \$900 million is lost in business in the United States every Friday the 13th. A businessman in Guangzhou, China, recently bid 54,000 yuan (almost seven times the country’s per capita annual income) for a lucky license plate containing the sequence 888. Continental Airlines recently advertised an \$888 flight to Beijing with the slogan “Lucky You,” and the Beijing Olympics are scheduled to open on August 8, 2008 at 8 p.m.

Similarly, Kramer and Block found in a previous study that Taiwanese consumers were more likely to purchase a radio priced at \$888 than one priced at \$777 – a 15 percent increase in price. In this study, the researchers expand on their prior work with superstitious beliefs. They reveal that, following product failure – specifically, a rice cooker that burnt the rice – Taiwanese consumers expected to be more disappointed if the rice cooker was red, a lucky color in Chinese culture, as opposed to green, a neutral color.

However, when consumers were made conscious of superstitions beforehand through a questionnaire discussing cultural awareness, they were equally disappointed with the red and green rice cookers.

In another study of American college students at an East Coast university, the researchers found that having participants think about Friday the 13th made them significantly more risk averse. Participants were told they were participating in two unrelated studies. After thinking about Friday the 13th or a neutral day (Tuesday the 19th), participants were then asked to make a choice in betting situations, for example a guaranteed \$18 or a 20 percent chance to win \$240. Those who had thought about Friday the 13th chose the safe option 49 percent of the time, versus only 35 percent of those who had thought about a neutral day.

“In particular, we show that superstitious beliefs have a robust influence on product satisfaction and decision making under risk,” the researchers write. “However, these effects are only observed when superstitious beliefs are allowed to work nonconsciously.”

Source: University of Chicago

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