



Retail Therapy

Why we shop—and what it means when we do

by Scott Rick, Ph.D.

Don't Forget the Milk (and the Charitable Donation)

Requests for donations at checkout may have surprising psychological effects.

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For better or worse, surprises are rare at the grocery store. But occasionally, cashiers surprise customers by asking them if they would like to donate a small amount of money to a charitable organization. By most accounts, this practice of “embedded giving” has been quite successful; Safeway, for example, [has raised millions of dollars](#) for breast cancer organizations. Presumably, not all of those dollars would have been donated without explicit prompts from cashiers, suggesting that the program has been beneficial.

There may be underappreciated costs of such programs, however. It goes without saying that many customers who say No to unanticipated donation requests feel guilty about their choice. But the reality is that most of us implicitly say No to charitable giving all day, every day. Dollars spent on non-necessities are dollars that are not donated to charity. The unanticipated donation request, however, makes the tradeoff between self and other much more explicit. Publicly saying No to charity when your Oreos have already been bagged can make you feel like you need to reevaluate your character. This is likely true despite the fact that there can be so many reasons for saying No (maybe you want more information about how the donation would be used, maybe there's another cause you feel more strongly about, or maybe you said Yes last time and you just feel like that's enough).

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One could argue, though, that the fleeting guilt of non-donors is a small price to pay for a program that raises a lot of money for good causes. But there is reason to be concerned about how donors behave after making a donation. On the one hand, there may be some “charitable momentum,” where donors are energized by the warm glow of giving, motivating them to seek out other opportunities to give. On the other hand, a small donation may allow participants to feel as if they're “off the hook” for a while with respect to charitable giving. That is, to the extent that grocery store-donors judge their behavior in a categorical way (e.g., “I've done my part by donating to charity”), they may be demotivated to take further charitable actions.

A good deal of research is consistent with the notion that one good deed may reduce the motivation to engage in others. Benoit Monin and colleagues have repeatedly documented that once people can achieve “moral credentials” via good deeds, they feel licensed to subsequently misbehave in other situations. In a shopping experiment, [Nina Mazar and Chen-Bo Zhong](#) found that people randomly assigned to buy green, environmentally friendly products (a seemingly good deed) were subsequently more likely to steal money than people randomly assigned to buy non-green products. [Aradhna Krishna](#), a colleague of mine at the University of Michigan, has found that people who bought “cause marketing” products (where a small portion of the purchase price is donated to charity) subsequently donated far less to charity than people who were not able to buy cause marketing products (meaning that charities received more when cause marketing products were not available than when they were available).

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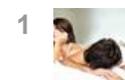
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This is certainly not to say that requesting donations at the register is sure (or even likely) to do more harm than good. However, a complete evaluation of the success of such programs requires understanding how customers (donors, in particular) respond psychologically to their own behavior in the store.



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