Trigger Healthy: How Samples Can Create a Healthy Shopping Momentum

Aner Tal, Cornell University, USA
Brian Wansink, Cornell University, USA

Healthy (unhealthy) samples in a grocery setting may prime choice towards healthier (less healthy) selections at a grocery store. We demonstrate this in both field (study 1) and lab (studies 2-3) settings.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017970/volumes/v42/NA-42

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Aner Tal, Cornell University, USA
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumer choice can be guided and determined wide array of situational factors, rather than by stable preferences (Bettman et al. 1998, Ariely 2008). A person’s current physical and motivational states, for example, can lead them to make more impulsive choices that are not consistent with their ongoing preferences (Loewenstein 1998, van den Bergh et al. 2008). Similarly, elements in one’s environment, rather than one’s preferences, can lead one to choose particular products over others, for instance by leading them to opt for healthy or unhealthy foods (Wansink 2008).

Choice behavior, then, may at times be quite arbitrary, shaped by temporary factors from the person or their environment. However, once a person has made a choice, this choice may shape subsequent choice behavior (Ariely and Norton 2007). This concept of coherent arbitrariness, supported in multiple studies, claims that once a behavior is engaged in, even in a single instance, a person would tend to see such behavior as reflecting their preferences, and so would persist in similar choice behaviors (Ariely et al. 2003, 2006). Such behavior is further bolstered by peoples’ need for consistency (Festinger 1957).

The current paper examines the notion that consumers do not even need to perceive a behavior as emanating from their own choice in order to maintain it and follow it with consistent behavior. We demonstrate that even if choice was determined by situational variables rather than actual choice, consumers would subsequently be biased towards choices that are consistent with the initial “choice”. In other words, even behavior that is not chosen, but rather determined by the situation, can lead to consistent subsequent behavior. Specifically, if one is given a healthy (vs. unhealthy) choice, subsequent behavior would be biased towards more healthy choices.

Consumers display a general tendency to persist in behavior. Once “the dam is broken” and behavior is engaged in, consumers may well continue to engage in a behavior. This has been shown to express itself in shopping behavior in general, in a “shopping momentum”, whereby once a consumer starts shopping, i.e., purchase a first item, they continue to make more purchases of the same type (Dhar et al. 2007). Here we see that a momentum can be more general, being channeled towards buying products of a particular type or class.

The current research explores whether the tendency to persist in initial choices may extend beyond choices of a particular product to choices of product types or classes. Specifically, we explore whether making a choice for a healthy/utilitarian or indulgent/hedonic product can lead one to make subsequent grocery choices that are consistent with the initial choice. More specifically, we explore whether giving a person an initial utilitarian or hedonic choice can lead to a shopping basket that is more hedonic or utilitarian overall.

In our first study, participants (N = 57) were asked to imagine they got a cookie (apple) sample at a grocery store before shopping. They then chose grocery products in a virtual grocery store designed specifically to offer a parallel selection of low-calorie/healthy and high-calorie/unhealthy options. We calculated a “health index” by deducting the number of high-calorie/unhealthy options from the number of low-calorie/healthy options. Participants who imagined getting an apple sample chose healthier shopping baskets (4.1) than did participants asked to imagine getting a cookie (1.3); t(55) = 2.06, p = .04. A replication with actual sampling of a healthy vs. unhealthy product produced similar effects.

A followup study was conducted at a grocery store. Participants were recruited at the store. Half were given a cookie, and half an apple. We subsequently gathered receipts documenting what each participant purchased. Initial analysis indicates increases in healthy purchases for those who received an apple, versus a cookie, sample. Spending on fruits and vegetables, for instance, was $6.41 for apple tasters, and only $5.02 for cookie tasters.

Further studies will explore the mechanisms behind this phenomenon. It may be that once a person engages in a behavior, they subconsciously and automatically assume that the behavior was self-chosen, and so engage in consistent behavior. In other words, it may be that even given a clear external cause for one’s behavior (being given a sample, or even being forced to take a sample), subconsciously the person feels like they have made a choice, and so engages in consistent choices. If this is the case, these trigger healthy effects may be due to altered self-perception (Bem 1972).

Alternately, it may be that behavior is automatically guided towards consistent choices, without need for mediation by a conscious perception of one’s self, one’s attitudes or preferences. Subsequent studies will explore these options. For instance, if the behavior is automatic rather than being mediated by conscious observation and categorization of one’s behavior, effects should persist even when there’s a deficiency of cognitive resources. Additional research may also explore whether a clearer attribution of behavior to external causes, for instance emphasizing that a food option was taken due to the dictates of the situation rather than free choice, would lead to lower consistency of subsequent shopping with the sample received. Alternately, research can examine whether increasing the feeling that one has made a free choice would increase the size of the effect, indicating the role of erroneously perceived self-determined behavior in generating the effects.

The current research has immediate practical applications for consumer welfare. Specifically, it implies that if choice settings could be engineered towards making consumers “opt for” choices that are better for them, subsequent choices would be influenced towards better shopping baskets and consumption behaviors. An obvious application demonstrated in our second study is to store samples. As demonstrated in study two, giving consumers a healthy or unhealthy sample can drive subsequent choices towards a healthier or less healthy shopping basket. Similar triggering of healthy choices can be undertaken in meal contexts.

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