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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

## **When Do Entertaining Promotions Trigger Caution?**

Donnel Briley, University of Sydney, Australia

Shai Danziger, Ben-Gurion University, Israel

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# When Do Entertaining Promotions Trigger Caution?

Donnel A. Briley, University of Sydney, Australia

Shai Danziger, Ben-Gurion University, Israel

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We propose that promotional efforts that attempt to entertain shoppers (e.g., “instant-win” games) can make deals less attractive for some consumers. In particular, such promotions can activate persuasion knowledge, triggering a cautious outlook and skepticism about the accompanying deal—but only for consumers who have a strong need to preserve their sense of self determination. Consistent with this persuasion knowledge conceptualization, we find in three studies that consumers who do not have strong needs for self determination find entertaining promotions more attractive than those who have strong needs, and that this difference disappears when all are prompted to adopt a cautious mindset.

Marketers use a variety of promotional vehicles to entice point of sale purchases, and sometimes these vehicles endeavor to entertain consumers. An example is the lottery-like *scratch-and-win* card that consumers must actively scratch to reveal possible deals. Presumably, the entertaining gaming experience increases the chances that shoppers will take advantage of the offered deal. In this research we test this assertion, suggesting that the effects can sometimes be negative. We propose that the attractiveness of deals delivered via a gaming experience is moderated by consumers’ self determination beliefs.

Lay theory suggests that infusing entertainment into purchase situations could be an effective tool in driving sales. The entertainment benefit, which applies to promotional games, giveaways and other events, encompasses the “active play” and “reactive aesthetic” values identified by Holbrook (1994). This benefit is yielded when shoppers have fun either engaging in promotional games or watching events and outcomes related to these promotions. Positive hedonic responses prompted by these entertaining experiences translate into more positive associations for the associated brand (Ward, Hill and Gardner 1987) and, consequently, increase purchase likelihood.

Other evidence indicates that games can be effective in improving deal sales. For example, coupons that shoppers unexpectedly receive in the store are 35% more effective in compelling purchases than off-the-shelf price discounts that offer the same monetary incentive (Dhar and Hoch, 1996). One might expect, then, that games could be similarly effective in converting deal purchase. Darke and Freedman (1995) suggest that promotional games might be particularly appealing because they “give each customer a chance to win a discount rather than giving everyone the same standard sale price”. The appeal of this approach, they suggest, could come from people’s desires to feel that they are lucky in obtaining the deal opportunity.

On the other hand, a case can be made that adding an entertaining aspect to promotions can hurt deal purchase rates. When consumers experience an entertaining event that is tied to a promotional deal, these relatively novel events might trigger a more cautious outlook in which the consumer becomes skeptical of the accompanying deal opportunity. More specifically, encountering the entertaining activity could activate consumers’ knowledge and beliefs regarding persuasion (Friestad and Wright, 1994), as they become sensitive to the fact that they are in the midst of a persuasive episode. This caution could lead to reactance (Brehm, 1966) and in so doing, increase the chances of deal rejection.

We propose that promotions that make a special attempt to entertain are more likely than more typical promotions to trigger

caution. Games are a relatively elaborate medium for offering deals, and this rather complex framing could sensitize consumers to the underlying purpose of the effort—influencing their selections.

## When is Entertainment Effective?

Some people believe that they determine their own destinies, perceiving a strong degree of contingency between their own actions and the outcomes of events they encounter; though others perceive a lesser degree of influence, viewing forces outside of their control as principal determinants (Rotter, 1966). We suggest that deals offered through an entertaining promotional vehicle are more likely to be chosen by the latter type of people than the former. People who have strong beliefs in self determination should give high priority to protecting themselves against events and people who impede their autonomy, and people who do not have such beliefs should give lower priority to these protections. Each of these belief system types spawns knowledge structures that support and maintain the system: Different goals, motives and attitudes are likely to develop. In particular, differences in self determination priorities should be accompanied by difference in the accessibility of knowledge structures that pertain to sensing and fending off efforts to sway one’s attitudes and choices. People who believe strongly versus weakly in self determination are likely to access such knowledge more frequently. As a result, those strong rather than weak in self determination should have this knowledge more accessible in memory.

This difference in accessibility of persuasion-related knowledge might not influence decisions when the promotion of interest is typical, but could be important when a promotion involving features that could signal the efforts intention to influence consumers. We suggest that promotions that include entertainment, specifically games, should receive different responses depending on the self determination beliefs of the consumer. For those strong in self determination, entertaining promotions are expected to trigger persuasion knowledge, because this knowledge is relatively accessible. A more cautious outlook is likely to follow, leading to skepticism about the deal. But, people with relatively weak beliefs regarding self determination, because persuasion knowledge is less accessible, are not likely to have the same response. Persuasion knowledge is less likely to become salient in the mind, and the positive effects of entertaining promotions, discussed above, are possible in this case.

## Overview of Studies

A pre-test confirmed that people infer greater influence intent from game-based promotions than more typical in-store promotions. In studies 1 and 2 we included Chinese, who tend to be low on self determination, and Americans, who tend to be high. We expected that differences in self determination needs across the two cultures would moderate choices of a promoted item delivered via “scratch and win” card. In study 1, Chinese participants were more likely to select a two-for-one tissue deal when it was offered via a “scratch-and-win” card than when offered as a regular store promotion. In contrast, the game based deal eroded selection among American participants. This pattern was replicated in study 2 for a golf umbrella deal. Again, the scratch-and-win delivery improved deal attractiveness among Chinese participants, but hurt it among American participants. Additionally, self-reported externality ten-

dencies mediated the effects of culture on deal selection when promotions were entertainment focused. Last, study 3 garnered evidence for our persuasion knowledge conceptualization whereby the attractiveness of an entertaining promotion delivery vehicle is moderated by whether it alerts shoppers to these promotions' intent to influence. Activating a "cautious" mindset by means of a priming manipulation, the study found that those low on self determination no longer found the entertaining promotion attractive. As predicted, the priming manipulation did not influence selection when the promotion was offered at an end of aisle display.

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