

HEY, BIG, SPENDER

What makes you choose one product over another when you go shopping? The answer lies in a complicated mix of psychology, symbolism and marketing. Conscious shopping could be the key to controlling your spending impulses

Words Sally Burdett

I have bought liquid soap purely for the fake fish and coral floating in it. I've bought a tub of hot chocolate because of the plastic lid moulded to resemble a bar of chocolate. I buy perfume because I want to capture the spirit of the flaxen-haired woman in the advert. I go shopping when I am happy, when I am sad, when I am bored... I buy on impulse, and even when armed with a concise shopping list, I can be captivated by new and shiny things.

Somewhere, a million marketers are rubbing their hands in glee because I am the sort of shopper they love most. If you recognise yourself here, then we need to go shopping in the supermarket of signs, symbols, colour and meaning. It may help you *not* whip out the credit card so quickly next time.

Why do we shop? Why do we choose the products we do out of an ever-increasing selection of goods? The first and obvious reason is practical – we need the washing powder, the eggs, the window cleaner, the all-new push-up bra with pull ties to deepen your cleavage when you need to... Actual need is only a small part of what makes us buy. The other factor – and one increasingly manipulated by marketers – is emotion. We are buying the promise of happiness in many different forms. The shoes with ridiculously high heels make us happy – we feel sophisticated, like we could be living in New York and hanging with Sarah Jessica Parker. The biodegradable washing powder – which is more expensive than our normal brand – makes us happy too. Happy that we are doing our bit for the environment, even though we haven't checked the small print to see the powder is approved by the organic watchdogs.

And the Shrek biscuits that little Amy nagged for make her happy... She gets to take her favourite cartoon character home with her and eat the stuff he likes.

Of course, a little bit of this retail happiness can be no bad

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thing, particularly if your budget allows it. But what you want to guard against is a mindless state of consumption. Because that makes us vulnerable, financially and emotionally, and will lead to very little satisfaction in the long run.

So, to understand how and why some products just get to us more than others, we need a little rundown on how the market works. Izzy Pugh is a semiotician working for the Added Value Group, a strategic marketing consultancy in Cape Town. Her job is to understand and decode the colours, trends, shapes and icons that are moving people. We encounter so many pieces of media. We just move through them subconsciously. It's my job to take a conscious approach.

Colour is a critical element. Our response to colour can be culturally determined. In China, says Pugh, red might mean a gift or good luck, because red is the colour for wrapping gifts in Europe, red might mean warning or danger. But red has universal meaning as well. It's a colour that generally grabs attention and shows 'look at me'. It's also the colour of Coca Cola cans, the most popular brand on the planet.

Blue has universal meaning too. The colour of the sky and the sea, it's associated with freshness, cleanliness. Lots of laundry products use blue in their packaging, says Pugh. Consumer research has shown that consumers prefer the water to turn blue when they add the powder – they believe it gives a better wash (in fact, it makes no difference).

Reaction to colour is also gender-linked. We gender children from an early age, using colour. We give pink to girls and blue to boys, says Pugh. Pink for girls speaks to them of comfort, childhood and femininity.

By colour choice alone we are moved to favour some products over others. It's pure perception and conditioning. Certain colours also come into favour depending on dominant trends. For example, 'wellness' is a major global trend. Eating right, looking after body and soul, caring for our planet. The colour that goes with all of this is – go on, guess – yes, it's green. The colour of leafy vegetables, fresh grass and the outdoors, it makes us feel we are getting back to nature in a hi-tech world. The wellness trend has even been picked up by McDonald's fast-food chains. In the USA and the UK, unlike most of its fast-food competitors, McDonald's has continued to profit because it has added salads and low-salt options to menus and done away with super-sizing. (McDonald's outlets in South Africa have not adopted these menu choices.)

Another big trend that's moving our world is woman power. No prizes for guessing that pink in its many different shades is the colour of this trend. Izzy Pugh says this is quite a turnaround. Ten years ago, pink was really off the radar because it wasn't cool to be in one gender camp or the other. And now it's back with quite a strong force – intense, rich pink. It's empowered, funky, free-spirited. A spirit that perhaps Korea picked up on in the remaking of its feminine hygiene products. No coy, butterfies or flowers for these tampons – Shock! Horror! – the packaging uses red, but red with a message: that women are not ashamed of their blood, and that red is also the colour of a favourite lipstick, a sexy bra and stilts.

Another ongoing trend, alongside wellness and proud femininity, is the penchant for anything industrial and technological – denoted by the matte metallic colours that are gaining in popularity (noticed how popular silver cars are these days?). And basic black, which denotes quality and class, is still a strong favourite.

Packaging is also a strong factor in edging us to favour one product over another. Consider perfume. We are essentially talking about smelly water. We use soap and deodorant a lot more these days, so strictly speaking we can live without it. But because fragrance is so evocative and personal, it can easily be linked to all sorts of wonderful feelings.

Jeremy Sampson, head of Interbrand Sampson – the to-burg office of the global branding consultancy Interbrand – says that because of this intangibility, packaging becomes ever more important. The average marketing spend on industrial goods might be two percent of revenue a year, but with luxury goods it might be as high as 15 or even 20 percent. With perfume it's about the shape of the bottle, the colour of the bottle, the lining to the box... it just goes on and on. It's an emotional rather than a functional deal.

Keep an eye out for new packaging trends as consumers

People are starting to reject mass production: they want a sense of individual care and attention

it breaks through the clutter of competing products and stands alone in the buyer's mind. So when you find yourself drawn to one product over another, take a moment and ask yourself why. And open your mind to the fact that it could be because you are standing in the trendiest store in town that happens to be playing your favourite CD, or simply that your purchase is being beautifully wrapped.

If you buy a shirt in a shop, explains Jeremy Sampson, they fold it nicely using tissue paper. Then they put it into a box with a nice wrapper, which is then put into a nice carrier bag. All these things are making statements and adding a huge premium to the price.

As you move towards your next purchase, be aware that 40 percent of people make buying decisions within one-and-a-half seconds. If a product can pique your curiosity, your senses or your desire for some form of satisfaction, you can be hooked into a purchase you might not otherwise have made.

Step back, says Izzy Pugh, look at what you have in your hand and ask yourself, "Why do I want this one and not that one?" Ask yourself why they have put certain colours on the pack and why they are using a particular style of language. But most importantly ask yourself: "Does it ring true to me?"

Jeremy recommends that you use technology to stay suited – Internet shopping gives you the world to compare prices with – so if you don't like the imported prices your beautician is charging on your favourite cosmetic, you might find it online at half the cost, even if you pay import duty.

The increasing sophistication of our shopping environment today brings with it good and bad news. Good because of more competition on price, greater variety and an exciting and dynamic shopping experience.

But bad, potentially, because marketing techniques are becoming more complicated and therefore more manipulative. If you can analyse why you desire something, you have begun to take back your power. After all, no one should be telling you how to spend your money.

