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How Do Consumers See a Product When They Hear Music?

Shoppers are more likely to buy a product from a different location when a pleasant sound coming from a particular direction draws attention to the item, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

“Suppose that you are standing in a supermarket aisle, choosing between two packets of cookies, one placed nearer your right side and the other nearer your left. While you are deciding, you hear an in-store announcement from your left, about store closing hours,” write authors Hao Shen (Chinese University of Hong Kong) and Jaideep Sengupta (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology). “Will this announcement, which is quite irrelevant to the relative merits of the two packets of cookies, influence your decision?”

In the example above, most consumers would choose the cookies on the left because consumers find it easier to visually process a product when it is presented in the same spatial direction as the auditory signal, and people tend to like things they find easy to process.

In one lab study, consumers were asked to form an impression of pictures of two hotel rooms on a computer screen, one of which was at the right of the screen and the other at the left, while listening to a news bulletin from a speaker placed on either side. Consumers found it easier to process the picture of hotel room located in the direction of the news and also indicated a greater preference for that room. In another study, consumers were more likely to choose soft drinks from a vending machine that broadcast a local news bulletin.

But things get a little more complicated if the signal is one we wish to avoid, like an unpleasant noise. In that case, people first turn their attention to the unpleasant noise in order to decipher the signal. Then avoidance kicks in as they voluntarily turn their attention away from the unpleasant signal.

In another set of studies, consumers examined pictures of two restaurants while listening to either annoying or pleasant music that came from their left or right side. The music was played for either a very short time (20 seconds) or a relatively long one (1.5 minutes). “The predicted impairment effect was observed when the unpleasant music was played for a longer time—now, it was the picture in the direction away from the music that was preferred,” the authors conclude.

Hao Shen and Jaideep Sengupta. “The Crossmodal Effect of Attention on Preferences: Facilitation versus Impairment.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2014. For more information, contact Hao Shen (shenhao@baf.msmail.cuhk.edu.hk) or visit <http://ejcr.org/>.

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