

## The Way the Brain Buys

It may have occurred to you, during the course of a dismal trawl round a supermarket indistinguishable from every other supermarket you have ever been into, to wonder why they are all the same. The answer is more sinister than depressing. It is not because the companies that operate them lack imagination. It is because they are all versed in the science of persuading people to buy things—a science that, thanks to technological advances, is beginning to unlock the innermost secrets of the consumer's mind.

Shoppers already know that everyday items, like milk, are invariably placed towards the back of a store to provide more opportunity to tempt customers. This is why pharmacies are generally at the rear, even in “convenience” stores. But supermarkets know shoppers know this, so they use other tricks, like placing popular items halfway along a section so that people have to walk all along the aisle looking for them. The idea is to boost “dwell time”: the length of time people spend in a store.

Traditionally retailers measure “footfall”, as the number of people entering a store is known, but those numbers say nothing about where people go and how long they spend there. But nowadays, a ubiquitous piece of technology can fill the gap: the mobile phone. Path Intelligence, a British company working with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, tracked people's phones at Gunwharf Quays, a large retail and leisure centre in Portsmouth—not by monitoring calls, but by plotting the positions of handsets as they transmit automatically to cellular networks. It found that when dwell time rose 1% sales rose 1.3%.

Most of the information that shoppers are bombarded with is visual: labels, price stickers and advertising. But the wafting bread aroma shows smell can usefully be stimulated too, says Simon Harrop, chief executive of BRAND sense agency, a British specialist in multi-sensory marketing. In the aisle by the laundry section he suggests introducing the smell of freshly laundered sheets. Even the sound of sheets being folded could be reproduced here and contained within the area using the latest audio technology. The Aroma Company, which Mr Harrop founded, has put the smell of coconut into the shops of Thompson, a British travel agent. Some suntan oils smell of coconut, so the scent is supposed to remind people of past holidays. The company even infuses the fresh smell of citrus into a range of clothing made by Odeur, a Swedish company. It can waft for up to 13 washes.

Such techniques are increasingly popular because of a deepening understanding about how shoppers make choices. People tell market researchers and “focus groups” that they make rational decisions about what to buy, considering things like price, selection or convenience. But subconscious forces, involving emotion and memories, are clearly also at work.

Retailers and producers talk a lot about the “moment of truth”. This is not a philosophical notion, but the point when people standing in the aisle decide what to buy and reach to get it. The Basingstoke store illustrates some of the ways used to get shoppers' hands to wobble in the direction of a particular product. At the instant coffee selection, for example, branded products from the big producers are arranged at eye-level while cheaper ones are lower down, along with the supermarket's own-label products.

Technology is making the process of monitoring shopper behaviour easier—which is why the security cameras in a store may be doing a lot more than simply watching out for theft. Rajeev

Sharma, of Pennsylvania State University, founded a company called VideoMining to automate the process. It uses image-recognition software to scan the pictures from security cameras of shoppers while they are making their selections. It is capable of looking at the actions of hundreds of thousands of people. It can measure how many went straight to one brand, the number that dithered and those that compared several, at the same time as sorting shoppers by age, gender and ethnicity.

### Questions 1-5

Decide if the following questions are true, false or not given.

- True = the statement matches the information in the passage
  - False = the statement contradicts the information in the passage
  - Not Given = the information is not found in the passage
1. Supermarkets are similar in layout because the companies don't have imagination.
  2. Commonly bought items are occasionally put at the back of the supermarket.
  3. Putting popular products midway down aisles encourages costumers to wander round the shop more in order find something new .
  4. Path Intelligence is a successful company, well known with universities.
  5. Path Intelligence was able to monitor where people's handsets were
  6. Customers can be influenced by aromas.
  7. The moment of truth is when people decide what they can afford.
  8. More cameras have been placed in supermarkets to record customer behaviour.
  9. The position of cameras is strategically planned to encourage people to buy brand names.

### Questions

Complete the sentences below with the correct word(s) taken from the passage. Use no more than three words and/or a number.

10. Supermarkets are highly experienced in the ..... of persuasion.
11. Popular items are placed strategically in aisles to increase .....
12. Research showed that there was a positive correlation between dwell time and .....
13. Smells reminiscent of previous vacations have been used to influence customers in the .....
14. Brand name products are often placed at ..... in the Basingstoke store.

### Answers

All answers can be found on my blog: [www.ieltsliz.com](http://www.ieltsliz.com) Reading section. You can also find more free IELTS practice lessons, model answers and tips on my blog and YouTube channel.

The passage was reported in the IELTS test in Sept 2015. It was taken from The Economist.