

Research: Does package size matter?

Researchers Coelho do Vale, Pieters and Zeelenberg studied the effects of small package size on self-control. This study focused on consumers' thoughts about indulgent products, such as crisps, chocolate, ice cream and cigarettes in differently sized packaging, and on the actual behaviour people show when coming into contact with indulgent products. The outcome of this study showed that small packaging does not exactly have the effect people with excess weight, for example, were hoping for.

Two tests were run to assess consumer behaviour. The first saw 60 students split up into two groups. Both groups were given a choice between two ways of topping up their prepaid mobile phone credit, either one 50 euro top up, or five 10 euro top ups. The first group was instructed to use the credit for useful and important matters. The second group was told to splash it all on chatting with friends. The second test triggered a spontaneous choice by 59 students in order to study their way of thinking. They were asked to imagine they were in a supermarket and faced with a choice between a large bag of crisps and four small ones. And they were also asked to indicate whether their choice was prompted by a sense of self-control or not.

The researchers subsequently studied the actual behaviour of 140 students. Half of this group was confronted with questions about their body shape as a way of inducing a sense of insecurity about their appearance. The other half was not asked these questions. All students subsequently had to participate in a study that involved them judging TV adverts. As they were watching these ads, researchers placed either a bowl with two large bags of crisps or one with nine small bags of crisps next to them for them to enjoy. Afterwards, they had to answer questions about that.

The results of the study show that consumers believe that small packaging helps control their consumption of indulgent products. This belief is even greater in people that actually worry about their ability to control their consumption levels. When subsequently checking the actual consumption, it turns out that the use of smaller packaging actually leads to an increase in consumption, also among consumers worried about their self-control. With large-sized packaging, consumers think longer before they consume, and hence consume less. Smaller packaging is therefore counterproductive. Consumers think they are cutting their consumption by consuming indulgent

products from small packages, often at a price premium, while they are unwittingly actually consuming more.

These findings neither imply that consumers should only purchase large-sized packages, nor that large-sized packages should be renounced altogether. It is important that consumers control their consumption, and not let themselves be influenced by the size of packaging at all.

Reference(s)

Coelho do Vale, R., Pieters, R., Zeelenberg, M. (2008), Flying under the radar: perverse package size effects on consumption self-regulation. *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol.35, p.380-390. *

*: available in the EURIB library.