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In retail, touch really can be golden

I'M writing about a box. This is a box with a sense of history.... Anyone who receives it can recall the first time, exactly where they were, who was giving it to them and, most important, why."

This opening to Christian Davies's essay Ode to a Little Blue Box is not so much about the container but its iconic Tiffany packaging. Davies is now the creative vice-president of Global Design & Innovation at Starbucks, and his words explain why companies invest millions to find the right weights and textures for their brands. This is the science of haptics—interaction involving the sense of touch—and it's a critical factor in consumer-purchasing decisions.

Haptics is a powerful form of nonverbal communication, which explains how the things we touch shape the way we feel. Although the concept has been around for decades, our understanding of haptics is deepening by the day.

A Procter & Gamble study conducted 21 years ago found that people were more likely to purchase a product they could feel—and were even willing to pay more for it. From this and many subsequent studies, it's clear that the sense of touch creates a connection between people and objects. The simple act of holding something creates a kind of psychological ownership that drives purchase. This is known as the "endowment effect"—the idea that people ascribe more value to things because they own them. The endowment effect explains why, in a famous neurological experiment, participants first given a Swiss chocolate bar refused to trade it for a coffee mug, whereas participants who were given the coffee mug first refused to trade it for chocolate.

"The endowment effect works even if you don't own the object," says Sebastian Haupt, a German psychologist and coauthor of the book *Touch! Der Haptik-Effekt im Multisensorischen Marketing*. "It can be triggered just by physical contact. We even get a similar effect if we see someone nearby holding a magazine or newspaper."

But while the act of touch is a powerful trigger, there are other factors at work. An increase in weight gives a product greater gravitas. In one experiment, people were asked to evaluate a job candidate while holding either a light or heavy clipboard. When holding the heavy clipboard, people viewed the candidate as expressing a more serious interest in the job.

Bricks and mortar retailers have long understood the power of touch. Consumers are particularly likely to want to get tactile with furniture, jewelry and clothes before they make a purchase.

A 2017 RetailDive consumer survey found that, despite the e-commerce boom, shoppers haven't changed their minds—62 percent said they preferred to touch a product before purchasing it.

This poses an obvious dilemma for e-tailers. Some are looking to virtual reality to provide consumers with an immersive shopping experience but researchers at Bristol University in the United Kingdom have developed a way of using ultrasound to make people feel they are handling 3D objects.

Mark Larson, head of Consumer & Retail, KPMG in the United States, says companies should think "haptically" when launching new products. "In a market where competition for consumers is fiercer than ever, every advantage counts. So the next time you create a product, hold it in your hands. You could be communicating more than you thought."

The article "In retail, touch really can be golden" by Willy Kruh, KPMG International was taken from KPMG's publication, entitled Consumer Currents.

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