

'Tis the season to be spending?

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Ambi Parameswaran on why the best seasons and reasons to shop may not be the most obvious ones

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Some years ago, I was discussing the appropriate time for a confectionery firm to launch their next candy. I suggested the summer holidays, when kids have a lot of time on hand to try new products. The client who was a confectionery industry veteran disagreed. He opined, based on experience, the best time to launch was after the schools reopened and were functioning to full capacity. His argument was that new confectionery brands do not have the ad spend to match FMCG and depend heavily on word-of-mouth. And it is only when schools are open that kids are able to exchange news about things of interest to them with a larger number of their peers. In the case of kids and confectionery brands, the consumption of advertising is not a distraction, but a valuable currency that they can trade on the school grounds the next day. And so, the best season to launch may depend on the target consumer and how they consume advertising.

Similarly, shopping seasons condition us to 'shop' by working on our psyche in different ways. Seasons have their psychological impact on consumption. When we see others consume, we too are nudged to consume. In his book *Mirroring People*, UCLA based neuroscientist Prof Marco Jacobani introduces us to mirror neurons and how they play a role in our interactions in society. It is possible mirror neurons affect the way we shop. When we see someone enjoying ice cream, for instance, our mirror neurons get activated. We are reminded of how we enjoy ice cream, triggering a purchase. Similarly, as we see people shop, our mirror neurons get triggered, prompting us to go shopping.

Retailers the world over have managed to create various occasions, to trigger these 'Shopping Mirror Neurons' as I may call them. Christmas shopping is a worldwide phenomenon. But in America, it's associated with Black Friday — the fourth Friday of November, designated the start of the Christmas shopping season since 1952. Through large parts of India we see Diwali as the biggest shopping season; in Kerala it is Onam and in West Bengal it is Pujo.

Shopping seasons work because retailers pull some powerful strings. These include price discounts and even an increased sense of religiosity. To get mirror neurons to kick in, retailers must stimulate the first set of shoppers out of ennui. The incentive is often a great offer, deal, or discount. Once the early adopters are lured, they trigger the move from the early majority to jump across the chasm and the shopping frenzy begins.

These methods have worked for decades. And we have created more occasions: Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day in the US. And in India, Akshaya Tritiya, Dhanteras, etc. Innovative retailers even create shopping seasons. Chennai-based Vivek managed to ensure that every devout Tamilian consumer finishes his quick temple visit on the morning of 1 January only to rush to the store. Big Bazaar created its own shopping occasions by targeting national holidays like Independence Day and Republic Day; the 'Sab Se Saste Din' at Big Bazaar. Online merchants have taken these tricks to the next level by creating newer and newer shopping occasions.

In a highly religious country like India there are still many more occasions waiting to be tapped: Ganesh Chaturthi, Rama Navami, Krishna Jayanti... the list can go on.

But will these techniques continue to deliver results in the coming decade?

In an article in HBR.org 'Why Retailers Should Retire Holiday Shopping Season', Denise Lee Yohn argues that the consumer is becoming more aware of the traps of shopping frenzy. With the availability of shopping information on a 24 by 7 basis, they are better informed about what to expect. As Itamar Simonsen and Emanuel Rosen have pointed out in their book Absolute Value, purchase decision process has dramatically changed with information about products and prices. Consumers no longer initiate shopping when they recognise a 'need' but are on a 'couch tracking' mode all the time: gathering information about products, reviews, new updates etc. So Black Friday may no longer be as big as it used to be, they argue.

Where does this leave the retailer who wants to trigger purchase during a specific season?

Experts believe retailers may have to shift from trying to influence behavior during a specific shopping period to engaging with consumers constantly. It may require greater investments in marketing communication, all year round. Or at least a more focused way of engaging with consumers and not just a burst during a festive or shopping season.

Shopping patterns are changing in India, just as they are changing across the world. Some of it is triggered by e-merchants. Some by retailers discovering new shopping occasions.

A simple truth is that consumers need a rational hook to splurge. A festive occasion gives multi-fold reasons: a link to some form of increased religiosity, faith and belief. Secondly, the promise of better deals. Finally, there is the joy of joining the neighbours and outdoing them with more shopping. Even if our mirror neurons start flashing warning signs!

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About Ambi Parameswaran

The author is founder of Brand-Building.com. His latest book 'Nawabs, Nudes, Noodles' looks at 50 Years of India through the advertising lens. Views expressed are personal.

Babita Baruah Managing Partner, GTB, WPP



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