Eye-track shopper browsing: uncovering the emotions that truly motivate purchases
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Eye-tracking studies produce valuable insights, but marketers need to correctly interpret the results and consider combining eye tracking with biometric measurement to uncover the emotions that truly motivate shoppers to make purchases.

Shoppers do not enter a store, examine every item, and select the best options based on their merits. The buying process is much more haphazard: some products are given careful consideration, others are tossed into the basket with hardly a thought, while other products are never even seen. Why do consumers shop this way, and what does this behaviour mean for marketers? One tool for understanding how shoppers behave and how to benefit from that knowledge is eye tracking.

Eye tracking can be used in shelf simulations or in real retail stores, alone or combined with additional biometric measurements as well as questionnaires. The technique generates a tremendous amount of data about the items that consumers fixate on, consider buying and ultimately purchase. While the data can be crunched, the art of eye tracking lies in correctly interpreting the results and knowing how to apply them to enhance marketing efforts.

After years of performing eye-tracking studies, and making recommendations based on the data generated, I have developed a list of best practices for using eye tracking to improve the understanding of shopper behaviour so as to enable brands to finesse their shopper marketing activity. When evaluating eye-tracking research, here are six useful ways to examine the findings:

1. Focus on Fixations

The human eye does not move slowly or smoothly. It cycles between abrupt movements, called ‘saccades’, lasting 20 to 40 milliseconds, and still periods, called ‘fixations’, from 100 to 400 milliseconds. The brain processes visual information only after the eyes fixate for 200 milliseconds; everything ‘seen’ during saccades is lost.

Because fixations are so brief, brands have less than one second to convey a message. In an eye-tracking study we conducted in a music store, one subject fixated on products and signs 245 different times in five minutes. Another subject fixated 1,569 different times in 15 minutes. We estimate that in a half-hour shopping trip, a customer’s eyes may fixate up to 1,800 times. That gives brands between 200 milliseconds and one second to get their message across.
When examining eye-tracking data, it's important to pay attention to items that cause fixations, especially for longer periods or repeated fixations, as those are the items that capture shopper attention.

2. Notice where Shoppers Look

Human beings have a small range of vision and poor peripheral perception. The typical range of focus is from around 30 degrees below eye level to 10 degrees above. Everything outside that range is fuzzy. Since shoppers tend to walk upright with their heads level, items near head level get the most attention.

Our research shows that left and right ends of shelves are visual anchors and shoppers work from the outside in, typically staying at eye level, unless something catches their attention above or below or they know that a favoured brand or package is located on a higher or lower shelf.

Heat maps derived from eye-tracking studies show which areas of the shelves get the most attention. Generally, end-aisle and eye-level shelves are the most seen. But be sure to look for products outside of the usual visual range that attract notice. What's special about these items? Bright colours? Brand status? You can pick up important insights about attention-grabbing strategies by examining products that get shoppers to expand their visual range.

3. Look at How Shoppers Read Packaging

Our research has shown a consistent pattern in how shoppers survey labels. The branding message in the middle of the package attracts the first attention and holds attention and interest the longest. After the central branding elements, the upper and lower parts of the packs are explored in more detail.

This means that the most important package elements that need to be communicated should be located as closely to the brandmark as possible. The less important the content, the further away it can be. The most important elements should be placed in concentric circles around the brandmark because that is how shopper attention shifts on viewing packages.
If an important element goes unnoticed, check its placement and ease of reading. Remember, we read left to right, and up to down. If the design incorporates vertical lettering or makes the text order confusing, shoppers will have to devote extra work to understanding the message – and most likely, they’ll just move along.

**4. Observe Which Product Categories Warrant More Consideration**

Shoppers give certain types of products thoughtful consideration, while other products are thrown into the cart seemingly with little forethought.

In one of our studies, shoppers picked up an average of three bags of prepackaged salad mix before selecting one; another study showed that they spent 62 seconds looking at salad dressing and only noticed 7% of the possible choices. On the other hand, the snack aisle got careful deliberation, with shoppers spending 168 seconds on salty snacks, noticing 42% of the options. However, a different study of standalone store displays showed that single snack packs resulted in very fast purchase times, with 98% of products picked up translating into a purchase, with each purchase decision only lasting four seconds on average.

When looking at eye-tracking results, it’s important to consider how product type could affect the way consumers interact. If they carefully read the packaging, providing extra information could sway the purchase decision. If they grab it without stopping, a distinctive design will make it more visible on the fly.

**5. Consider Packaging Strategy**

Many marketing managers instinctively want to make their product stand out so shoppers will see it. This is a good bet for leading, well-known products but, however counterintuitive this may seem, the same strategy can backfire for new or struggling products. Sometimes it’s better to look like your competitors.

Consider the cereal aisle. Shoppers looking for Cheerios will quickly scan the aisle for its bright yellow box, filtering out everything that doesn’t match their mental image of their cereal of choice. If a competing circular oat cereal is in a green or orange box, it will be completely overlooked. But if it’s in a box in a similar shade of yellow, and placed near the Cheerios, shoppers will see it and possibly consider switching.

If your eye-tracking data shows that a product with a seemingly attention-grabbing design is being overlooked, think about whether it would actually do better by ripping a page from the competitor’s playbook.

**6. Think about Shoppers’ Feelings**

Consumers like to think that they make rational decisions, and many brands operate assuming that they do: that shoppers think about what they need, evaluate their choices, and select the best options. But when we observe how people actually shop, we see a very different pattern of behaviour.

Most purchase decisions are made subconsciously, before high-level, conscious considerations, like value and quality, even enter the mental conversation. Perhaps 10% of sensory information makes it to the conscious level; the rest is jumbled together in the subconscious, where emotional triggers, including colour, memory associations, and package design, hold sway.

When we combine eye tracking with biometric indicators (measuring heart rate, movement, breathing, and galvanic skin...
response), we find a strong correlation with emotional response and purchase decisions. An item may catch a shopper’s eye and trigger a faster pulse, heavier breathing, and more perspiration, often so subtly that the shopper doesn't even notice. But if it’s a happy reaction, it can trigger a purchase.

While eye-tracking studies alone produce valuable insights, marketers who want to get the most from their research budgets should consider combining eye tracking with biometric measurement to uncover the emotions that truly motivate shoppers to make purchases.

About the author

Kirk Hendrickson is CEO of Eye Faster, a leading provider of shopper research. He developed his expertise in eye tracking and shopper research while leading worldwide field operations for EmSense Corporation and product management for MarketTools, Inc.

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