MARKETING

Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping

by Paco Underhill

How people really shop, measured on video: where they turn, what they touch, and why they walk away.

BEST POINTS FROM THE BOOK

01 **Watch what shoppers do, not what they say.**

Underhill's Envirosell 'trackers' follow shoppers and film them in the act. What people report about their shopping and what the tape shows are often two different things.

02 **The front of the store is a landing strip, not a stage.**

The 'decompression zone': in the first steps inside, shoppers are slowing down and adjusting, and they notice almost nothing. Displays, signs, and greeters placed there are wasted.

03 **Shoppers turn right. Put your best goods on the right.**

Video after video shows people veering right as they settle in - the 'invariant right.' The front-right of the store is prime ground; fight the pattern or use it, but never ignore it.

04 **Brush a shopper's backside and you lose the sale.**

The famous 'butt-brush effect,' discovered at a tie rack shoppers kept abandoning: customers, especially women, stop browsing a display when strangers bump them from behind. Wide aisles and breathing room protect sales.

05 **If they do not touch it, they rarely buy it.**

Buying is hands-on and shopping is a sensory act. Glass, sealed packaging, and museum-like displays that block touch quietly cut sales; shoppers who take clothes into a fitting room buy at far higher rates.

06 **Full hands end the shopping trip.**

People have two hands, and one is usually already holding a bag or coat. Once both are full, they stop picking things up - so put baskets where shoppers' hands fill up, not only at the door.

07 **Count conversion, not traffic.**

A crowded store can still be a failing store. Conversion rate - the share of visitors who actually buy - tells the truth about the shop floor, and contact with a staff member pushes it up sharply.

08 **Most signs are never read.**

Shoppers read on the move, at an angle, in a glance. Signs fail when they carry too many words or sit where nobody looks; a sign works only in the shopper's path, at eye level, at the moment of decision.

09 **Men hunt. Women shop. And mind the companion.**

Men tend to grab and go and resist asking staff; women browse, compare, and read. A bored companion cuts the trip short - give him a seat or something to look at, or her shopping ends early too.

10 **If aging eyes cannot read it, aging wallets will not buy it.**

Eyesight fades from about forty: small type and low contrast become unreadable. Underhill's senior-shopper research says big type and strong contrast are not courtesy - they are sales.

11 **Time in store sells. Time in line kills.**

The longer people browse, the more they buy - but waiting is the single biggest driver of a bad service impression. Once a staff member acknowledges a waiting customer, the same wait feels much shorter.

12 **Design, merchandise, and operations must agree - or each sabotages the others.**

Underhill's 'Big Three': the room, the goods, and the staff's work are one system. A beautiful display that blocks the register queue, or shelves staff cannot keep straight, sells less than a plainer setup that works as a whole.

THE BOOK, IN SHORT

The big idea: shopping can be studied like a science. Paco Underhill, an environmental psychologist, founded Envirosell, a research firm whose 'trackers' follow and film real shoppers for hours, then tell retailers what actually happens in their aisles - which is often the opposite of what managers assume. What shoppers say they do and what the tape shows are frequently two different things.

Entering a store has rules. Shoppers speed through the 'decompression zone' at the front and notice almost nothing there, so key displays and signs placed there are wasted. Once settled, most people drift right - Underhill's 'invariant right' - so the right side is prime ground. Inside, touch is king: shoppers who cannot pick a product up rarely buy it, and having only two hands caps what they can carry. Crowding has a cost - the famous 'butt-brush effect,' where customers (especially women) abandon a display after being bumped from behind. Signs fail when they are long, small, or placed where nobody's eyes are.

Different shoppers need different stores. Men tend to hunt - grab and go, reluctant to ask for help - while women browse, compare, and read, and a bored male companion can cut a woman's trip short. Older shoppers, a huge and growing market, are lost to small type and weak contrast they simply cannot read. Children steer family purchases more than most retailers admit.

The money metric is conversion: not how many people enter, but how many buy - and staff contact drives it up. Time spent shopping raises sales, while time spent waiting in line kills them; design, merchandise, and operations - the 'Big Three' - either support each other or quietly sabotage each other. The updated edition extends the science to the internet and global retail, but the core lesson travels anywhere: design around watched behavior, not guesses.

DO THIS WEEK

This week, stand in any store (or review your own product page with fresh eyes) for ten minutes. Note where people slow down, touch, hesitate, and leave. Fix the single biggest friction spot you find - the real-world version of a butt-brush.

Why We Buy by Paco Underhill, first published 1999 (Simon & Schuster) and updated in a revised edition for the internet and the global consumer. Essential for anyone who sells in a store, at a booth, or on a page.