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The Double Bacon Extra Cheese Problem

Consumers are embarrassed by their predilections. Eliminate embarrassment, increase sales.

By Joshua Gans



Order pizza online and you remove the need to ask a human for your embarrassing toppings.

In a classic *Seinfeld* episode, a purveyor of highly sought-after soup has no patience for customers taking too long to order and so enforces a set of fascist rules to keep the line moving. While the “soup Nazi” episode is highly amusing, recent research suggests that consumers tend to keep things simple all on their own—not to save time, but to avoid embarrassment. In sitcoms, embarrassment is the engine that keeps the laughs coming. In real life, we avoid it at all costs.

A group of four management professors—Avi Goldfarb, Ryan McDevitt, Sampsa Samila, and Brian Silverman—has undertaken a project to measure the effects of social embarrassment in retailing. In **a paper**—which they weren’t too embarrassed to subtitle “An Embarrassment of Niches?”—they examined situations in which a shift in retail practice reduced human interaction and observed consequent changes in purchasing behavior. Their findings are surprising: Even in situations where the potential for social embarrassment would appear to be low, fear of embarrassment led consumers to sublimate their true desires, whether for a rarefied French wine or a pizza with extra bacon.

The first case the authors document was a late 1980s change in Swedish liquor retailing that led to stores being moved from an “ask a clerk to retrieve a bottle” model to a “self-service” format. It turned out that, not only did removing a layer of human interaction spike sales (by 20 percent) but it also led to a shift in those sales toward a large number of difficult-to-pronounce drinks. According to Swedes independently surveyed by the researchers, it is apparently harder to say *Stolichnaya* than *Absolut* in Swedish, and there were real challenges with French wine pronunciation as well.* So take away having to say anything out loud and the sales of the tongue-tied bottles increased by 7 percent.

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Was this fear of embarrassment or just a matter of convenience in communication? It is hard to know for sure in the Sweden example. But two decades later, when an undisclosed pizza chain (similar to Domino's, but with a regional focus) offered a new way of ordering online, embarrassment was more clearly in play.

Order online and you remove the need to talk to a human over the phone or at a counter. You might think that this change would merely be more convenient, but wouldn't materially affect the food you order. Then I thought about what my typical "conversation" with a pizza website might sound like:

"Umm, ok I'd like one Margarita pizza and a BBQ Chicken with pineapple. Oh no scratch that, can I have half the BBQ Chicken with pineapple and the other half with peppers. And I'd like the Margarita pizza to have a thin crust and, wow, what is a four cheese mushroom pizza? I'll have one of those but can you remove the goat's cheese ... wait, does that work with this coupon?"

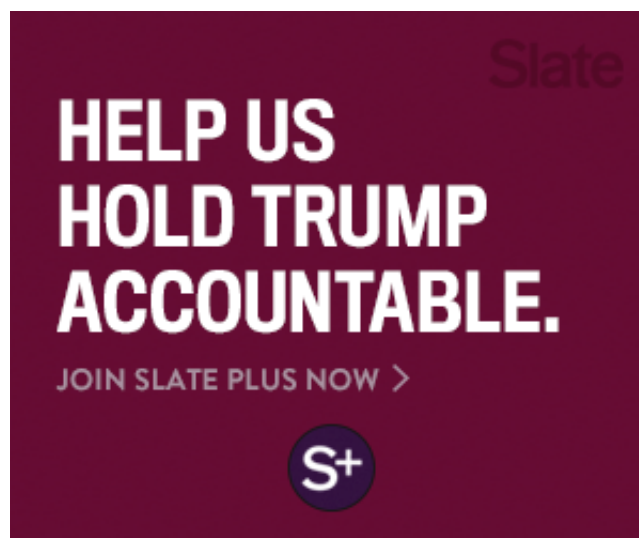
Suffice it to say, something usually holds me back from making such a speech to a fellow human being. Apparently, I'm not alone. Despite the new website being fairly rudimentary (no search, no ratings, no recommendations, no saved orders), the researchers were able to compare the orders of the 6.7 percent of their customers now using the website to what they previously asked for over the phone. (The company kept good records.) They found that customers loaded on additional toppings, spending \$0.61 more per order on goods that were 15 percent more complex (as measured by the number of instructions customers gave for each pizza in their order) compared to what they used to order offline. (With all of

those extra toppings also came higher calorie counts—about 6 percent more than a base that was already pretty large; it is pizza after all.)

In this case it was easy to rule out other explanations for the change in consumer behavior. The website offered a familiar menu and the study focused on regular customers (who presumably knew what options were available). And it wasn't just a matter of the website offering increased convenience. All of the action was in the toppings—not in the total number of pizzas ordered. If it were easier to order online we would expect more orders—getting pizza starts to look better than having to call the Chinese joint, for one thing—and not just a different number of ingredients. And it wasn't just a change in quantity; Web users made different types of orders. It is just as simple to say “double” on the phone as it is to request it online, but the website induced more “double bacon” than “double veggies”

orders. The picture painted is one of people avoiding the awkwardness of complex—and fattening—orders online and making simpler—and healthier—ones when they had to deal with a real, live person.

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So what are the implications of all this? Both the Swedish liquor and U.S. pizza examples suggest that removing embarrassment (of any imaginable kind) leads to consumers increasing the variety of products they purchase. This shouldn't be surprising, as social pressures typically push us toward the norm rather than exploring new things and exercising our more finicky tastes. But the recent paper drives home that making a store safe for finickyness without shame has real

effects. For the pizza chain, avoidance of embarrassment led to 21.4 percent more profits per customer.

Given embarrassment's power over consumer pocketbooks, what's the owner or manager of a brick and mortar store to do? At first blush, it might seem like just the latest prompt to phase the human element out of retail. But as anyone who has attempted to operate a self-checkout machine—or navigate a phone tree—can attest, this isn't always a recipe for success. The question is whether we can make our retail establishments present a more comfortable environment, allowing consumers to ask for the things they really want.

This, of course, requires a deeper understanding of what precisely consumers are embarrassed about when making specialized requests. Did I place a simple order because I sensed impatience from the clerk behind the counter? Or did I want to project my simple, unfussy ways to the folks in line behind me—and not draw attention to my eccentricities? For the first type of embarrassment, you could imagine prompts that would coax the customer into asking for trickier options (“No topping combination is too hard for us!”). But this would likely have little impact on the second type of customer.

Another solution is to bring the anonymity of online ordering into the real world, by giving customers the choice of **placing orders using a tablet** before getting to a check-out counter or with their own smartphone, preloaded with specialized options; something Starbucks has understood in its rollout of an app that allows customers to peruse its complicated menu on their phones (and pay with their phones, too).

Of course, managers also need to be mindful that embarrassment doesn't only befall consumers. What of store clerks who are forced to ask for addresses or emails for future marketing purposes, or compelled to push expensive insurance plans or store credit cards, knowing that this will likely annoy the customer. An embarrassed clerk is likely not a happy one, and could pass that unhappiness onto customers—or just quit. Managers would do well to consider such matters lest red faces bring with them red bottom lines.

Correction, Dec. 10, 2013: This article originally misstated that it is harder to say Absolut than Stolichnaya in Swedish. It is harder to say Stolichnaya. **(Return.)**

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The Anything-but-Housing Secretary

On Capitol Hill, Ben Carson revealed he's barely interested in the mission of the department he's about to run.

By Henry Grabar

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Ben Carson testifies during his HUD secretary confirmation hearing before the Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee in Washington, D.C., Jan. 12, 2017.

When he was a boy, Dr. Ben Carson used to accompany his mother to the mansions she cleaned. She'd ask him where he would rather live: This stranger's big house, or their tiny flat near the railroad tracks in Southwest Detroit.



HENRY GRABAR

Henry Grabar is a staff writer for *Slate's* Moneybox.

“You know the person who has the most to do with determining where you live?” she asked her son. “It’s you. It’s not somebody else, it’s not the environment.”

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