

CONSUMER DECISION-MAKING: THE INFLUENCE OF ZERO PRICE OFFERS

Kateryna Martiushenko

*Prague University of Economics and Business, Faculty of Management
mark11@vse.cz*

Abstract:

This article examines the issue of the irrational behaviour of individuals and examines the impact of zero price offers. The main aim is to find how consumers react to the alluring word "free" and if they prefer a zero price product over another. The study aims to verify the impact of this effect on the decision-making process of members of Generation Z and uses a combination of qualitative research methods: focus group and experiment. The focus group method serves as preliminary research and the experiment highlights the existence of the zero price offer. The results suggest that consumers are influenced by a zero price offer, which motivates them to buy more products than they need.

Keywords:

consumer behaviour, irrational behaviour, pricing, zero-price effect, purchase intentions

JEL Classification: M31

1 Introduction

People face different decisions in their lifetime. Economic behaviour naturally accompanies consumers, even though they do not realise it. In the decision-making process, consumers consider which products to invest money in and if it will bring them the expected benefits (Diamond & Vartiainen, 2012; Solomon et al., 2017; Thaler, 1980). The "homo economicus" model in economics states that people who behave rationally in every situation are perfectly informed (Altman, 2017; Edwards, 2009). Everyone is an economist in some way (Ariely, 2009) However, irrational human behaviour is not accidental: it is systematic and predictable (Ariely, 2010). Economic and marketing techniques influence consumers; each detail can affect a person (Alavi et al., 2015; Thaler, 1980). Price is a crucial factor that can influence consumers' thinking. Its irrationality is affected by various attractive offers in stores (Hustić & Gregurec, 2015; Smith, 2016). One of these is the zero-price effect discussed in this paper.

Consumers face offers labelled "Free!", "Bonus!", "Discount!" at every step and are attracted by these "magical" words or a tempting price tag. The label "free" tends to increase the benefit of the product in the eyes of consumers (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010; Kotler, 2019). It acts as a "magnet" for customers and influences the consumer decision-making process (Ariely, 2009). Zero is not just an ordinary price –it works as an alarm for the brain (Ariely, 2010; Shampanier et al., 2007). When something is free, customers tend to completely forget the cons of such a purchase (Ariely, 2010). Consequently, in the idea of getting something for free, people buy more or buy goods they do not need (Altman, 2017; Toth, 2013).

According to US law, an offer can be described as "free" when the product is offered without any fees or conditions. An alternative is that the conditions are clearly defined (Ariely, 2010). There cannot be an artificial increase in the prices of products or services when purchasing is a condition for obtaining a free bonus (Cheng & Tang, 2010; Nicolau, 2012). For example, blog articles, antivirus software and public libraries are free when there are no membership fees (Wang, 2019). A "free" offer can also mean "bonuses" to the main purchase (Shampanier et al., 2007). For example, in online stores at a certain

value of purchase, customers can get free shipping, a warranty and other services. Some e-shops even have a "Goods with gifts" category so customers can get extra goods when buying a certain brand. Such offers can be found in e-shops with electronics, perfumes and cosmetics (Ariely, 2010; Kotler, 2019).

In practice, sellers use various approaches and tricks to attract customers and convince them that the purchase is valuable (Altman, 2017; Toth, 2013). The "buy one get one free" offer is another example of the zero-price effect. Consumers can find them in pharmacies, electronics stores and grocery stores. If the retailer wants to sell a certain product, another item can be offered for free in the form of a bonus. However, it does not work this way: the calculations confirm that the consumer will still cover the total price of the extra product (Ariely, 2009; Thaler, 1980). Therefore, discounts such as this can result in a more expensive bill for consumers.

Another similar offer is "X% free" when customers perceive that they will receive more of the product for the same price. This makes customers buy more of the goods. However, this package is X% more expensive than the smaller one (Kotler, 2019; Shampanier et al., 2007).

A zero price offer can attract everyone's attention, regardless of gender, age or title and the members of Generation Z are no exception. Generation Z, or the Internet Generation, represents the group of people born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s (Pandit, 2015; Rue, 2018). Representatives of this generation form a promising and large consumer market (Bateh, 2018; McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2009). As customers, members of Generation Z are impulsive, impatient and picky. It is essential for them that the products they buy are in line with their identity and values or meet their personal needs (Priporas et al., 2017). They prefer to know the truth, the story of the brand and the people behind it. They have no problem buying something based on the recommendations of parents and friends or based on comments on social networks (Pandit, 2015). Generation Z is also pragmatic. Members choose a product based on quality and usability. They want a product at a reasonable price and with useful features (Bateh, 2018; Priporas et al., 2017). Generation Z customers like to shop and are willing to buy something new, even if they do not need it at all (Pandit, 2015; Wood, 2013).

Thus, this study aims to find out how "zero" price influences Generation Z consumer behaviour and to verify zero price functioning in practice. To meet this goal, the following research question was formulated:

- RQ1: What influence does a zero price offer have on Generation Z?

2 Methods

The study focuses on finding out the behaviour of Generation Z under the influence of a zero price in supermarkets. As the study explores zero price impacts in-depth, qualitative research was conducted. Specifically, the research is based on the focus group and the experiment. The combination of these methods enables to examine the problem in-depth and acquire more knowledge of the zero price offer.

Chocolate was chosen as the research product because it is a product that is regularly consumed and intended for self-consumption. From the view of the purchase decision-making process, the buyer is also the user or final consumer of chocolate. Classic milk chocolate was chosen as a research product for the experiment. This ensured the respondents were not influenced by a specific taste.

2.1 Focus group

The focus group served as preliminary research. Specific brands of chocolate, prices, conditions and restrictions for the experiment were adjusted according to the results of the focus group.

The method of the focus group enabled to understand the target audience and find out opinions and attitudes towards the studied phenomena (Hennink, 2014; Nyumba et al., 2018).

Participants

Six students of the Faculty of Management took part in the focus group in exchange for financial compensation. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 23 years old and were members of Generation Z. The focus group met on the premises of the Faculty of Management in Jindřichův Hradec.

Measures and Procedure

The first step of the focus group was the preparation, i.e. the creation of a discussion scenario and a list of questions (Nyumba et al., 2018). This was the basis for leading the discussion afterwards. The scenario was designed so that the questions and information contained in it could not affect the thoughts and opinions of the respondents. Each step was aimed to motivate the participants to think about the topic and generate new ideas (Cox et al., 1976; McLafferty, 2004). The focus group scenario consisted of two sections of open questions:

- First part: price and "free" offer.
 - What do you think the price of the product expresses?
 - How does it influence your purchase decisions?
 - How do you perceive the relationship between price and quality and taste?
 - What marketing tools and offers do you notice in a store?
 - How do you perceive the word "free" in the offer of some goods?
 - What do you think about the "2 + 1" or "X% extra" offer for a product?
- Second part: Focus on decision making (product - chocolate).
 - What do you follow when you buy chocolate for self-consumption?
 - According to which criteria do you choose chocolate as a gift?
 - Could you sort the brands of chocolates by price?
 - Which brand do you consider expensive and which brand do you consider cheap?
 - Do you have any thoughts or ideas on the topic that you would like to share?

The goal of the first section was to explore whether the participants are aware of zero price offers and are influenced by them. This part led to the understanding of the participants' purchase decision-making.

The second section was devoted to the choice of the product and consisted of questions about the chocolate price, quality, etc.

The respondents were also asked to cooperatively create a collage containing their associations with the words "for free". This helped to enrich the research with some interesting insights and to motivate the participants to think creatively (Freeman, 2007; McLafferty, 2004). The total duration of the focus group was two hours.

2.2 Experiment

The experiment consisted of short semi-structured interviews conducted individually with each of the respondents. Before performing the experiment, certain rules and restrictions had to be set so as not to distort the results (Shampanier et al., 2007; Smith, 1962). Table 1 shows the selected products and individual experimental situations. The prices in the first situation were based on commercial prices. These prices were chosen according to the Lidl store and were valid to April 2019, when the experiment was performed. In the second situation, the prices were halved to make the price difference significant. This enabled to find out how consumers decide when faced with discounts or special offers. In the third situation, the price of the more expensive chocolate remained the same and the cheaper chocolate was

free. This situation was set to determine if consumers would choose the same chocolate as in the second condition or if they would be influenced by the zero price offer.

Participants

The research sample consisted of 26 students aged 19-23 and all members of Generation Z. Given the nature of qualitative research, the size of the research sample is sufficient. The common features of the participants can be defined, which also proves that the considered sample is sufficient (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Silverman, 2020).

As participation in the focus group discussion could impact subsequent answers and choices in the experiment, the participants who took part in the focus group were excluded from the experiment research sample. The respondents had to like chocolate and consume it regularly; otherwise, they were also excluded from the research sample.

Table 1: Milka vs. Fin Carré price

Conditions		
1.	32 CZK	14 CZK
2.	16 CZK	7 CZK
3.	16 CZK	FREE

Source: own processing

Measures and Procedure

The respondents were assured of their anonymity before the experiment. They were asked to read and sign a written consent to conduct the interview and to permit recording with a portable voice recorder. The respondents did not know that the zero price effect was being investigated and were not provided with any detailed information about the products and explanations of why they were discounted.

Each respondent was asked to imagine buying chocolate at the store. The products under research were available during each meeting with the respondents so they could look at the chocolate and evaluate the packaging.

The respondents were exposed to three pictures with the selected chocolate brands and price conditions. Each set of conditions was placed on a separate piece of paper to ensure that the participants did not know how the offer would change. After each set condition, the respondents were asked the complementary question to follow their decision-making process and to find out the argumentation for their choices. The experiment included interview questions to find out the reasoning for the respondents' choice. The scenario for the experiment:

- How often do you consume chocolate?
- What do you follow when you buy chocolate for your own consumption?
- To show: the first condition is 32 CZK and 14 CZK.
 - Complementary question: Why did you choose this brand?
- To show: the second condition is 16 CZK and 7 CZK.
 - Complementary question: Why did you choose this brand?

- To show: the third condition is 16 CZK and FREE.
 - Complementary question: Why did you choose this brand?

The experiment took place in the premises of the Faculty of Management in Jindřichův Hradec. The experiment with each respondent took an average of 10 minutes.

Analysis

The discussion with the focus group and all interviews from the experiment were manually transcribed and the data analysed manually by the "pencil-paper" method. Criteria and answers that were repeated and expressed a common idea were highlighted. Furthermore, the open-coding technique was used to group answers and draw a conclusion (Švaříček, 2007). Connections between the respondents' answers were sought.

3 Results

3.1 Focus group

During the first activity in the form of collage making, the students recalled offers such as "+ X% free", "free shipping", "buy one get one free", coupons and trial periods that represent a "for free" offer. Also included were some brands, shops and supermarkets that use this offer and are known for their various sales. The collage showed the existence of both positive and negative associations, reactions and emotions regarding the "for free" offer. The respondents included the words they associate with these offers, such as "quality", "price", "trick", "lie", "trust".

Price

While discussing the price, the respondents noted that some products were overpriced. They associated this with a well-known brand or certain criteria, such as the name of the company, the composition of the product and the quality of the raw materials. The respondents realised that sometimes they only pay more for a name or a brand.

- *"Sometimes the quality of branded goods is not as exceptional or better than that of cheaper goods"* (Respondent 1, 2019).

Attention to price

The respondents agreed that price is an important criterion for them and that they certainly notice the prices in stores when shopping. They also stated that they make decisions depending on price, but it differs for the type of goods purchased. If it was a product such as chocolate, wine or favourite sweets, the participants preferred quality over price and were willing to pay for a more expensive brand. However, the respondents agreed that when it comes to common goods, they preferred cheaper ones or tried to buy products with a discount. They agreed that they also trust products from supermarket brands such as K Classic, Fin Carré and AH Basic. They reasoned this with a ratio between good quality and a reasonable price.

Quality and price

According to the respondents, quality and price are interrelated:

- *"The higher the price, the better the quality. A more expensive product consists of better raw materials, is carefully made and inspires confidence"* (Respondent 2, 2019).

However, this is not always the case. A higher price for goods does not guarantee that their taste or quality is better. The perception and evaluation of these aspects are very subjective. The respondents admitted that if the price is too low, they have doubts about the quality.

- *"Usually when shopping, I prefer a product where the price is neither low nor high. I choose the middle ground because I assume that the product has good quality in relation to its price"* (Respondent 3, 2019).

Discounts and zero price offer

The respondents stated that they notice discount offers and red signs in stores. As soon as the store door opens in front of them, words like "special price", "special offer" and "discount" immediately attract their attention. They also notice points of sale (POS) and points of purchase (POP) promotions as well as product information when they are shopping. One mentioned he could not stop himself from buying a product that had been reduced by X%.

- *"It's a good offer, usually the product is more expensive!"* (Respondent 4, 2019).

The respondents pointed out that sometimes they buy a product that was not on their shopping list because of the discount. If they are buying a present for someone, they tend to avoid the offer with a gift or an extra product. This decision was reasoned with the gift recipient's expected reaction: the recipient could deduce that the giver had made a saving or bought something cheaper.

Important criteria for them were the taste and quality of the chocolate. The respondents agreed that they buy chocolate occasionally and expect to be satisfied with their choice and get the desired benefit. The low price and unknown brands of chocolate raise doubts about quality. On the other hand, another respondent pointed out that there is no reason to pay more for chocolate just because of a brand. The respondents also stated that they would spend 30 CZK to 60 CZK on average for a bar of chocolate. They also sorted the chocolate brands due to perceived price, specifically from the most expensive to the least expensive: Lindt, Ritter Sport, Milka, Orion, Fin Carré. It resulted out that the respondents consider unknown brands of chocolate, which cost less than 30 CZK, to be of lower quality.

It can be deduced from the focus group that product choice depends on the price, on the information about the product and the quality of the product. The importance of these criteria depends on the type of product. In the case of buying chocolate, it can be assumed that members of Generation Z pay attention to quality and choose a brand they have experience of. On the other hand, they also notice discount offers and buy goods in the "free" offer. The subsequent experiment would answer the question of which criterion plays a more important role – quality or zero price.

3.2 Experiment

Most respondents declared they consume chocolate once a week and mentioned taste, price, quality and brand recognition as criteria for buying chocolate. They named these criteria due to their own experience with certain brands and satisfaction with their purchase. The variety of flavours and the cocoa percentage in chocolate was also important to respondents.

The respondents who mentioned the price as a criterion would probably choose a cheaper brand.

- *"It does not taste bad, but cheaper"* (Respondent I, 2019)

Nevertheless, consumers are differently sensitive to price. Participants who paid more attention to quality preferred to pay more to get the better product:

- *"The higher the price, the better the quality."* (Respondent II, 2019).

The participants who preferred the brand of chocolate they had experience of stayed loyal to this brand.

- *"Milka is a brand that is perfect. I am seeing this other brand for the first time, I don't know what it tastes like"* (Respondent III, 2019).

In the first situation, the choice of the well-known Milka chocolate prevailed. The respondents, who chose more expensive chocolate in this case, explained this by saying that it is a popular brand and has higher quality. Those who chose cheaper chocolate focused on the price of the chocolate from the beginning. The results show that consumers mostly prefer a well-known brand. They agree to pay more to ensure their satisfaction. If consumers bought the cheaper chocolate and were not satisfied with it, the purchase would mean a loss of 14 CZK for them.

In the second situation, when the price of the chocolate was reduced by 50%, the result was surprising. The respondents mostly chose the more expensive Milka chocolate and some admitted that if they encountered a similar discount in the store, they would buy Milka, even if they did not primarily go there to buy chocolate. Consumers want a well-known and popular product, but at the same time, they do not want to pay the full price. In the case of discounts, the consumer receives an impulse to stockpile. A too low price of Fin Carré chocolate triggered concern and distrust of the product and the respondents did not understand why Fin Carré chocolate cost only 7 CZK. They assumed that it was because of the lower quality. In this situation, only a few respondents chose the cheaper option because they chose this option from the beginning.

The third situation showed the impact of a zero price offer on consumer behaviour. The results favoured the Fin Carré chocolate offered for "free". Even though Milka chocolate was at the same price as before, most respondents resorted to the cheaper chocolate. In this case, even those participants who claimed that the quality and brand of chocolate are most important to them would prefer the cheaper one. They did not have to pay anything in this case. During the interviews, some respondents did not even try to hide that they are affected by the zero price. They often smiled and replied: "It's for free." However, a few participants hesitated because they did not have enough information about the product. In such a case, consumers do not know if it is a marketing trick, or if the seller wants to sell the last pieces of a product. Because such consumers need more information, they may avoid the "free" option and chose an option they know better. Sellers should provide customers with sufficient information; otherwise, the customers may think that the product is defective.

The results of the experiment show that consumers care about the quality of the product, but in practice, are affected by zero price. This may be explained by the income satiation of the respondents who are students completing their studies and do not have full-time jobs and may be why they prefer discounts and try to save at each opportunity. The results conclude that the participants forgot their criteria and preferences when it came to the magical word "free": they were affected by the zero price offer.

4 Summary and Discussion

The results suggest that consumer thinking is influenced by economic and marketing techniques, where the essential factor is the price (similar to Kotler & Armstrong, 2010; Kotler, 2019). The study found that members of Generation Z are attracted by zero price. This phenomenon acts as a "magnet" for them (as stated in Ariely, 2009) and influences their decision-making process. The reason may be that members of Generation Z are impulsive, impatient and pragmatic (Pandit, 2015).

However, it cannot be easily concluded that an offer with a zero price has a positive or negative effect on consumers' purchasing decisions. Different opinions appeared during the research. The respondents perceived the products offered for "free" as an added value and benefit products (similar to the findings of Shampanier et al., 2007). In the result, most of the respondents were willing to go for a zero price and try a new product. Consumers prefer a product with a zero price because they do not need to pay for it, which is why they do not resist it. Conversely, consumers also have negative associations with a "free" offer because it forces them to buy more goods or to buy a product that they do not need.

The results show that when something is free, customers tend to completely forget their beliefs and the cons regarding such a purchase (which conform with the findings of Ariely, 2010). Consumers are

willing to change their behaviour because of the price. When considering the price, a consumer can deduce whether the product is high quality or unnecessarily overpriced. During the experiment, the participants were influenced by this offer, so they forgot their preferences and decision-making criteria. Even those who mentioned the importance of quality and brand popularity chose the "zero price" product option. As previously mentioned, members of Generation Z are pragmatic and prefer a product at a reasonable price and with useful features (Bateh, 2018; Priporas et al., 2017). The respondents' choice could be influenced by their income: students usually only have a part-time job and are constantly trying to save money. There were a few participants who always chose the more expensive option because the price of the second bar of chocolate was suspiciously low. Such offers can discourage consumers, which is why the seller should set the correct price: it cannot be too low or too high. At the same time, the seller should provide sufficient information on the conditions of the promotion or discount. Consumers may feel that the seller wants to deceive them, so would avoid this offer and assume that the product is of poor quality or defective.

For future research, it would be beneficial to set other conditions for the experiment. The experiment in this study contained only a hypothetical situation so it would be relevant to extend the research to a real money "in-store" transaction. This would enable to find out if consumers behave in the same way when facing real spending conditions. Another opportunity is to conduct an experiment with other types of products and find out how the respondents would decide under these circumstances. It would also be valuable to follow the other aspects more in-depth, for example, how decisions vary by gender, income consumer status, etc.

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