

The body weight bias in sales

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Despite today's laws and public attitude against overt discrimination, subtle forms of prejudice are still active in the marketplace—often without our awareness. Previous research has shown that overweight or obese customers can experience less eye contact, friendliness and smiling from sales personnel as well as longer wait times.

Findings from a new study suggest that sales workers may also unwittingly be prone to another form of discrimination toward overweight or [obese people](#): making product recommendations based on someone's body shape.

In a series of studies, the researchers discovered that sales employees were more likely to encourage heavy customers to buy round-shaped products. In one experiment, a trained actress posing as a shopper solicited wristwatch and perfume product recommendations from 37 sales people at a suburban shopping mall. Half of the time she appeared as her natural body size, 4 feet, 11 inches tall and 102 pounds, and the remaining time she wore a professionally constructed prosthesis that made her look obese. As the researchers predicted, the sales personnel recommended rounded watches and perfume bottles when she appeared obese, and they suggested more narrow, rectangular products when she was thin.

They launched a similar experiment online using a digitally manipulated image of a sample consumer who appeared either thin, moderate in weight or obese. The participants selected products they thought the different consumers would prefer, and they chose between angular and

round mirrors, lamps, candles and other items. Again, rounded products were chosen more consistently for the obese customers and angular products were more common for the thinner customers.

To see if the effect was similar with obese males, the researchers conducted the same experiment with a digitally manipulated male customer, and the outcomes were consistent.

The researchers were also interested in investigating which stereotype associated with heavy people was underlying the tendency to recommend round products. Previous literature has shown that rounder products are associated with friendliness and warmth, while angular products are associated with toughness and threat. Similarly, heavier people are seen as more friendly than thin people. To test whether this correlation between friendliness, round products and heavy people was driving the product recommendations, the researchers instructed an actress to be a friendly or unfriendly shopper in a short video. She appeared either thin as her own size or obese with a prosthesis.

The researchers found that both body size and the level of friendliness drove the propensity to recommend round products. Participants were most likely to recommend round products when the shopper was obese and friendly, and most likely to suggest angular products when the customer was thin and unfriendly.

"There is no evidence to suggest that people prefer round versus angular products based on their own body size," says Beth Vallen, Ph.D., one of the authors and an associate professor of marketing at Villanova University in Pennsylvania. "Salespeople are using these inferences to drive recommendations, but this is not aligned to product preferences. This could result in less satisfaction."

For Vallen and her co-authors, the findings suggest that stereotypes

based on [body size](#) and personality traits are influencing purchase recommendations, which is significant because previous research has shown that recommended products are twice as likely to be purchased as non-recommended products.

"There are many subtle forms of discrimination based on everything from weight to age to the gender of customers. Training the salesforce to elicit more information from consumers rather than making assumptions could increase the chance of providing recommendations that match consumer preferences, which could in turn improve satisfaction with purchases."

More information: Beth Vallen et al, Shape- and Trait-Congruency: Using Appearance-based Cues as a Basis for Product Recommendations, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1065](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1065)

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