Is Distraction Always Bad? The Effect of Distraction on Purchase Intention

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the effects of distraction on sales performance, highlighting the role of the "blemish effect" as a moderator. The findings reveal that sales presentations are less effective in distracting environments; however, the introduction of a blemish enhances purchase intentions among distracted viewers. These insights provide valuable implications for future research and offer practical guidance for managers, salespeople, and professionals engaged in persuasion.

Keywords: sales, sales performance, distraction, blemish effect, lab study, persuasion, sales strategy

"…if you're making your case to someone who's not intently weighing every single word, list all the positives— but do add a mild negative." – Daniel Pink, *To Sell is Human*

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of technology and social media, distractions are more prevalent than ever (Koessmeier & Büttner, 2021; Vogels et al., 2022). Smartphones, tablets, and computers offer constant access to apps and notifications, while platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok are designed to keep users engaged, often disrupting focus (Stevens, 2024). These distractions can significantly impair cognitive performance (Craik, 2014; Vasiliev et al., 2021). Therefore, salespeople should carefully select sales locations to minimize distractions and enhance sales effectiveness (Futtrell, 2007; Richmond, 2012).

However, salespeople often lack full control over the meeting venue. For instance, a client may prefer a sports bar or casual restaurant with TVs and constant noise, or smartphone notifications may disrupt a sales meeting. Therefore, salespeople, client service professionals, and anyone involved in sales or negotiation must develop strategies to manage and mitigate distractions during meetings. While the negative impact of distraction on cognitive function is well-documented, research on its effects in the marketplace is scarce despite the fact that many consumers are consistently distracted (Stevens, 2024; Vogels et al., 2022).

This research explores a strategy that salespeople can use to minimize the effects of distraction. Sales literature suggests that small, adjacent flaws in a product can make it more interesting—a concept known as the blemish effect. This effect implies that introducing a minor negative attribute can enhance persuasion (Pink, 2012). By presenting a minor flaw at the end of a persuasive presentation, salespeople can strengthen initial positive impressions formed from favorable information (Ein-Gar et al., 2012). In this research, we propose that the blemish effect may be particularly beneficial when customers are distracted.

This article aims to bridge the literature on blemishing effects and distraction. The research questions underlying this study are: (1) What are the effects of distraction on purchase intention? (2) Does the blemish effect mitigate the negative impact of distraction on purchase intention?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The Effects of Distraction

A review of 30 studies on distraction revealed mixed effects on communication and sales effectiveness (Nelson et al., 1993). Nelson et al. (1993) found that distraction during communication can have two main outcomes: (1) it inhibits the receiver from accepting a message aligned with their original position, and (2) it encourages the receiver to accept a message that contradicts their initial stance. When communication aligns with the receiver's preexisting opinions, they respond positively; however, when the message conflicts with their views, the receiver tends to discredit the information.

Distraction, therefore, weakens both the reinforcement of consistent messages and the rejection of those inconsistent with the receiver's beliefs. Modern persuasion and sales techniques emphasize building relationships, understanding client's needs, and using consultative

approaches (Moncrief & Marshall, 2005). Given that these approaches typically aim to align with client beliefs, we expect that distraction will reduce the effectiveness of persuasion efforts.

H1: Distraction reduces purchase intention.

The Moderating Role of the Blemish Effect

The blemishing effect occurs when adding a minor negative detail to an otherwise positive description enhances the overall impression (Ein-Gar et al., 2012). The blemish effect is grounded in the primacy effect, which suggests that people give more weight to early information (Asch, 1946). Under low processing effort—due to factors like mental fatigue, distraction, or low personal relevance—people tend to form early opinions and stick to them, even when later information contradicts these initial impressions (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Petty et al., 1976). The blemishing effect builds on this, suggesting that introducing a minor negative detail after a series of positive statements strengthens the initial positive impression under low-effort processing. The weak negative detail prompts receivers to defend their earlier positive judgments, thus reinforcing their favorable view.

Ein-Gar et al. (2012) demonstrated that the blemishing effect boosts purchase intentions under low-effort processing conditions, but it has no benefit when subjects are in a high-effort processing state. To be effective, the blemish must be small and introduced late in the presentation after most positive information has been shared. The studies also demonstrated that the effect holds when low processing effort is induced by conditions such as being instructed not to shift their gaze, worrying about an upcoming exam, or having a holistic (low-processing) cognitive style.

While the Ein-Gar et al. (2012) studies used direct cognitive processing manipulations and simple communication contexts, they did not explore environmental distraction as a source of low processing effort. However, prior research on the primacy effect (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996; Petty et al., 1976) suggests that distraction could similarly induce low processing effort. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis in the context of sales encounters with a distracting environment and distracted subjects:

H2: The blemish effect moderates the negative effects of distraction on purchase intention.

STUDY 1

Undergraduate students from a US university participated in the Study 1. The study aimed to examine the negative effect of distraction on buying intentions and to test whether a blemish could mitigate this effect.

We also conducted Study 1 to assess the strength of the blemish. For the blemish effect to occur, it had to be noticeable but not significantly alter the perceived value. Twenty-five marketing students were presented with a hypothetical campus food delivery service. In the non-blemish condition, delivery time was 30 minutes, while the blemish condition extended it to 60 minutes between 5:00 PM and 8:00 PM. Students rated the blemish on a scale from -3 to +3, with a mean score of -0.88 ($t = -2.68$, $p < 0.01$), indicating it was mildly negative, which was appropriate for the study.

The main was conducted with 55 marketing students in a 2x2 design (distraction vs. no distraction x blemish vs. no blemish). Environmental distraction was created by playing sports

highlights on a TV behind the salesperson in one room, mimicking real-world scenarios like corporate lobbies or restaurants. The sound was kept at a low, conversational level.

Three trained graduate assistants delivered identical sales pitches, rotating between the blemish and non-blemish conditions, as well as distraction and non-distraction conditions. Participants rated their purchase intentions on a 7-point scale, relying solely on the pitch without handouts. Afterward, they were debriefed, and their feedback was recorded.

Results

To test the impact of a distracting environment, an ANOVA on buying intent was run on the subjects not exposed to blemishing. The mean purchase intention of subjects participating in a non-blemished presentation who were in the non-distracted environment to those who were in the room with the sports videos running ($M_{\text{no distraction}} = 5.29$ vs. $M_{\text{video}} = 4.13$; $F(1,21) = 3.61$, $p = .07$), which supports H1.

STUDY 2

Study 2 tested the hypotheses with a larger sample and captured actual distraction measures. The setup mirrored Study 1, with marketing students receiving sales pitches in both distracted and non-distracted environments. The distraction was manipulated by playing sports video clips behind the salesperson, selling the same campus cafeteria delivery service as in Study 1. Based on feedback, the service price was reduced from $5 to $2.50.

Additional distraction measures were included in the survey. The first was the salesperson's assessment of each subject's distraction, rated on a 1-7 Likert scale as subjects submitted their questionnaires. The second measure followed the standard distraction construct (Nelson, Duncan, and Kiecker, 1993), and subjects also rated their interest in the sports videos to explore its correlation with distraction.

A total of 102 students participated, distributed across 2x2 experimental conditions (distraction vs. no distraction x blemish vs. no blemish). In distraction rooms, a sports telecast was played on a TV screen behind or to the side of the salesperson. In non-distraction rooms, the TV was turned off. Three trained graduate assistants delivered the sales pitches, and participants completed questionnaires afterward.

Results

This study included three distraction measures: (1) presenter-observed distraction, (2) self-reported distraction (Nelson et al., 1993), and (3) interest in the distracting videos. An ANOVA was performed on each measure, classifying subjects as "high distraction" if their score exceeded the median. The results focus on the blemish effect on distracted subjects.

Salesperson Observed Distraction

Presenters rated subjects' distraction levels on a 7-point Likert scale. A score of 4 or above was considered "distracted." For subjects rated as distracted (16 out of 62), the mean increase in buying intention from blemishing was marginally significant ($p = 0.08$), supporting the hypothesis (H2) that blemishing is more effective for distracted individuals.

Table 1: Blemish with Distraction – as identified by Presenters

Presenters	Blemish	Mean Buying I	N	F	Sig
Distracted ≥ 4	No Blemish	4.80	10	3.71	.08
	Blemished	6.17	6		
Distracted ≥ 5	No Blemish	4.75	4	4.74	.07
	Blemished	6.50	4		

Self-reported distraction

The self-reported distraction used the Nelson et al. (1993) scale. Subjects scoring above the median (4.5) showed a significant increase in buying intentions when exposed to a blemish ($p = 0.04$).

Table 2: Blemish Effect on Distracted Subjects (Subjects above median score)

	Blemish	Mean Buying I	N	F	Sig
Distracted > 4.5	No Blemish	4.53	17	4.57	.04
	Blemished	5.69	13		

Interest in Distraction

Subjects' interest in sports (the content of the distraction) correlated with higher self-reported distraction ($r = 0.322$, $p < 0.05$). While it was somewhat predictive, it added little value beyond the presence of a distracting environment.

Table 3: Blemish and the Subject's Interest in the Subject of the Distraction

	Blemish	Mean Buying I	N	F	Sig
Sports Interest ≥ 4	No Blemish	4.79	19	.217	.17
	Blemished	5.47	15		
Observed distraction ≥ 4	No Blemish	4.80	10	3.71	.08
	Blemished	6.17	6		
Self-Distracted > 4.5 No Blemish	No Blemish	4.83	18	3.96	.06
	Blemished	5.69	16		
Distracting Environment	No Blemish	4.83	35	1.76	.19
	Blemished	5.32	28		

Blemishing in Distracting Environments

Subjects in distracting environments had significantly higher distraction scores than those in non-distracting rooms. Those not identified as distracted showed minimal or insignificant improvement in buying intentions from blemishing, reinforcing that distraction is key to the blemish effect.

Table 4: Distraction Scores

Measured Ind	Distracting	Without Video
Mean	3.97	1.88
Median	4.41	1.33
75 - percentile	5.33	2.13
25 - percentile	2.63	1.00

CONCLUSION

The blemish effect, initially tested under controlled conditions (Ein-Gar, Shiv, & Tormala, 2012), has proven to be effective in real-world persuasive settings. This study confirms that (1) audience distraction weakens persuasive efforts; and (2) introducing a minor negative detail late in the presentation (blemishing) helps mitigate this negative impact. By doing so, the study contributes to sales literature (DeConinck & Johnson-Busbin, 2023; Yim et al., 2023), offering practical advice: In distracting environments, sales professionals should use the blemish effect—adding a small flaw toward the end—when the audience appears distracted.

This research advances understanding of the blemish effect by (1) replicating the Ein-Gar (2012) findings in realistic contexts, (2) using audience distraction to induce low processing states, (3) demonstrating the benefits of blemishing for distracted subjects, and (4) emphasizing the importance of identifying distracted audiences for effective blemishing.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDY

Further research is needed to identify when the blemish effect is most effective. For example, do professional negotiators and salespeople with experience, outperform trained experimental presenters in recognizing when to use blemishing under distraction? Additionally, developing a tool to gauge the right level of blemishing before it becomes a clear negative would be valuable.

This study's limitations include using students as sales presenters and prospects. Graduate students played the role of sales presenters, while undergraduate volunteers acted as customers. The service evaluated off-hour food delivery and was familiar to most participants, making them reasonable subjects. However, future field experiments with professional salespeople and real customers would provide deeper insights.

Exploring the ethics of using psychological tactics like the blemish effect in business would be valuable, especially considering customer reactions if they recognize such techniques. The gambling industry has faced criticism for exploiting psychological triggers like "near misses" on vulnerable individuals (Rosengren, 2016).

Recent discussions on manipulation ethics highlight two key issues: manipulation versus autonomy and environmental manipulation to influence decisions (Noggle, 2020). Some scholars argue that manipulation is always unethical, while others favor a situational approach.

The ethical defense of blemishing lies in its role in countering the negative impact of distractions on a presentation. Data from Study 1 and Study 2 show that while distraction harms a presentation, using a blemish mitigates part of the damage. In a way, the recipient might experience some relief from distraction due to the blemish.

In conclusion, professionals should avoid distracting environments and only use blemishing when the audience is visibly distracted. Deliberately creating distractions solely to

employ blemishing is not advisable. Further research on the ethics of manipulating environments in business settings would provide valuable insights.

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