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Selling Consumers on Smarter Choices

An interview with Professor Kyle Murray
Consumer Marketing Researcher, University of Alberta

How do you track consumer behaviour?

Today we have so many choices as consumers and those choices have a real impact on society. So people are struggling a little with that and we're trying to help them. Recently we've become really interested in energy. So how people, how your level of energy, affects the choices you make, and how that can change based on things like scent and sound and colour. In particular, because what we've found is it can have a huge impact on choice, and even possibly impact things like do you have free will? Because what we find is that when people run out of energy, or they're in a frustrated or negative state, they make choices that they really themselves wouldn't want to make if they could step back. And so again, we're going to try and better understand that and maybe help them make better choices.

What is the economic impact of your research?

Some people think that helping consumers make better decisions is not good for retailers or for businesses, and sort of that notion that what businesses are trying to do is trick us into buying things we don't really want. But that's rarely the case. The most successful businesses get us to buy things or help us buy things that we really do want. And so the more that we can help as researchers, consumers make better decisions, the more we help retailers run better businesses.

What questions are you trying to answer?

Primarily what we do in my lab is experimental work. So we bring consumers into the lab and we put them through different scenarios. One of the things that's interesting about the work that we do is it's Canadian focused. So it is different. There are a lot of similarities, but coming to Canada, is not just like going to another part of the US. There are some important differences in the market here. So it's not what people always think, but what we're really getting after is the psychology that underlies why people make choices.