



# Don't Be a Credit Card Zombie

Sex sells—we know that. But smell and sound do too. Here's how to battle the most artful retail tactics in the book

BY CLINT CARTER • PHOTOGRAPH BY LEVI BROWN

**WHEN MARTIN LINDSTROM WALKS THROUGH A STORE**, he doesn't see products. He sees persuasion. He doesn't smell rich, natural leather or the comforting scent of baked bread—he catches whiffs of manipulation. "Retail stores are not designed to entertain you," says Lindstrom, a retail consultant and the author of *Brandwashed*. "They're designed to make you spend as much money as possible."

We're not talking about merely using photos of hot women to sell jeans. Retailers want you to see an antidote to the disillusionment of the real world, your quick exit from a recessionary funk. The store is cleaner, simpler, and less stressful than your life is. It sounds better, smells better, and makes you feel better about yourself. You can't help but try to take some of that with you—even if it's out of your price range.

So we spent a day shadowing Lindstrom on a faux shopping spree to see how retailers separate us from our money. We then tapped our experts for ways to deflect these subliminal maneuvers so when we do hand over our hard-earned cash, it's willingly and with a clear head.



Prop styling: Angela Campos/Stockland Market

## SNEAKY STORE TACTIC 1

Your defense  
Check your  
stats

Before you head out on a shopping trip, take 10 minutes or so to look over your past credit card statements. Studies suggest that consumers who shop with credit cards tend to spend more than those who go out armed with cash. And a new study from the University of Kansas found that people shopping with credit cards also focus more on product benefits and pay less attention to costs. By looking over statements of past purchases beforehand, you redirect your attention to the hard numbers. You'll also think about how much you've already put on your credit card that month, says study author Promotesh Chatterjee, Ph.D. He adds that keeping recent spending in mind as you browse the store can help you maintain higher defenses.

## Make you feel at home

We begin at a Manhattan stalwart, the iconic flagship location of 140-year-old Bloomingdale's. No sooner do we walk through the door than Lindstrom points out the 12-inch-square tiles under our feet. "They don't want people crowding the doorway, or passersby won't come in," he says. "The big tiles encourage faster walking."

The entire sales floor is cleverly designed to manage your actions and reactions and to keep you engaged as long as possible. Once you're pulled in and enjoying yourself, the scents, sounds, and orderly visual displays take the whole experience a step further: They make you feel comfortable and at home. It works, too: In a 2011 study published in the *Journal of Marketing Research*, people who were primed for relaxation were willing to spend 11 percent more on digital cameras.

Scents are particularly effective. Bloomingdale's has six restaurants, including a burger joint and a bakery. Pleasant aromas wafting through can increase shoppers' pleasure, which may make them spend more time in stores, a 2011 Australian study found. The nice-smell ploy works especially well when combined with the right playlist—and the Bloomingdale's mix is designed to appeal to as broad a selection of shoppers as possible. Combined, these tactics can open your senses—and your wallet—by about 35 percent, Lindstrom estimates. "Suddenly you touch, see, and hear better, which breaks down your critical filter and makes you more likely to buy," he says.

## SNEAKY STORE TACTIC 2

Your defense  
Become  
a hunter

## Make you feel like a man

Next stop: the J.Crew Men's Shop on Broadway. It's a wood-and-leather-filled store with vintage books, typewriters, and Rolex watches scattered alongside the clothes. The goal is to reassure us dudes that we're cut from the same cloth as Steve McQueen and Ernest Hemingway. Take the dressing rooms: Each door stretches straight to the ceiling. This conveys power. "We know that if the dressing room is tall like this, men buy 8 percent more clothing," Lindstrom says.

Then there's the network of boxes along the walls. This is a common design flourish in men's stores. Instead of hanging on racks, most of the shirts and pants are tucked into wooden cubes that look like grade-school cubbies. "The more insecure we are and the less we complete things in our daily lives, the more we like things to be boxed in," says Lindstrom. Research from the University of Pennsylvania backs him up: People who felt the least control over their surroundings were more attracted to images and logos bound by heavy borders.

Retailers also know that we like to consider ourselves mavericks—we don't like being told what to do. So J.Crew, just like American Eagle Outfitters, Eddie Bauer, and Gap, decorate their stores with intentional signs of wear. "This costs a lot of money to do," Lindstrom says. "But it makes guys feel a bit rebellious." Imperfections surround us—scuffed storefront signage, crooked brass lamps. It's all for show, and you feel every bit as rugged as the tattered, off-kilter rugs under your feet.

Before you start looking at the stuff on the shelves and racks, take a few minutes to identify as much of the retail theatrics as you can. "It's a lot harder to be fooled when you're making a game out of spotting this stuff," says Stanford University psychologist Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D., author of *The Willpower Instinct*. "It sounds simple, but people report a lot of success when they go out like detectives looking for gimmicks." Still can't shake the feeling that a certain blazer or fedora is going to improve your success with the ladies? Try picturing it on your ex's new boyfriend or on a boss you can't stand. "You know it's ridiculous," says McGonigal. "But all you have to do is shift what your unconscious brain is doing to you."

EVEN BIGGER TRICKS  
THAT STRIP YOU  
OF MAJOR MONEY

*Everybody wants your dough. But the better you're able to manage who you give it to, the more control you'll have over your financial health. Eliminate these three expenses from your life.*

**1 BOGUS CHARGES**  
Health-care fraud costs tens of billions of dollars a year, says Michael Williams of the National Health Care Anti-Fraud Association. "One common scheme is to bill for tests that either were unnecessary or never done. Occasionally men are even billed for female-specific procedures." Many of these costs fall to your insurer, but depending on your plan, they could also eat away at your deductible and lead to higher premiums. Carefully review any bills from your providers that you are responsible for paying. If you see anything unusual, contact your insurance company or call the provider directly.

**2 OVERDRAFT PROTECTION**  
After banks collected an estimated \$23.7 billion in overdraft protection fees in 2008, the Federal Reserve issued a rule requiring bankers to apply these fees only to those who opt in to the service. "In some ways, the law legitimizes a scam," says Kathleen Day of the Center for Responsible Lending. If you have overdraft protection and your checking account dips into negative territory, your debit purchases won't be declined; you'll just incur charges as high as \$35 per use. Be sure you haven't accidentally opted in, and stay above your bank's minimum balance. Or use a credit card.

**3 MUTUAL FUNDS**  
By investing in a mutual fund, you're paying for a fund manager to design your portfolio. That's fine if the manager's picks significantly outperform the market. But according to a 2010 *Journal of Finance* study, they often don't. In 75 percent of cases, actively managed funds beat the market barely enough to justify the fees—meaning you earn no extra money but the manager still wins. Worse, 24 percent of funds earned less than the market average. Consider selling your managed funds if they haven't provided superior net-of-fee returns in the past, and reinvest in the lowest-fee index funds. —c.c.

# GET HOOKED ON SOMETHING GOOD

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Natural Fruit Essence



Bubbles

WWW.662

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Poland Spring

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Mandarin Orange  
Raspberry Lime

NATURE'S FIX™



## Men's Wealth

Don't Be a Credit Card Zombie

### SNEAKY STORE TACTIC 3



### Induct you into the tribe

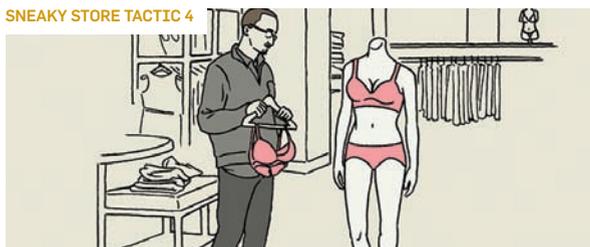
We're at Billabong in SoHo. Here, the beachside motif doesn't quite jibe with the city backdrop of concrete and cast iron. We step inside and receive a friendly nod from an employee who's wearing what appears to be a backstage pass around his neck. Brands today strive to create an inclusive atmosphere, making you feel as if you're part of a club. From the boardwalk-style wood floor to the wall racks of imitation driftwood, this place tells me I'm different from the people outside the store. "It's supposed to justify why I'm spending 25 to 50 percent more for clothes made in China," says Lindstrom.

Next we head to REI, where walls of jackets are peppered with snowboards. People come here to buy snowboards, so wouldn't it make more sense to put all the boards in one place? But the primary reason these boards are scattered isn't to sell more of them; it's to remind us what our REI tribe stands for. The induction ceremony continues downstairs with a giant photo collage under an "Employees in Action" sign. There's Derrick skiing in Vail, and Rick kayaking with his son in California. Who *wouldn't* want to hang with those guys?

Your defense  
Claim virtual membership

Buying impulses are often driven by the need to broadcast the tribe you identify with, says Seth Godin, author of *All Marketers Are Liars*. Social media—Twitter, Pinterest, Godin's site Squidoo—can alleviate this need by giving you a broadcasting platform that doesn't cost money. ("These boots kick ass!") That way you receive credit for recognizing a great product, and the sense of ownership you receive over it can make buying it seem unnecessary.

### SNEAKY STORE TACTIC 4



### Shut down the rational part of your brain

Our final stop is Victoria's Secret so we can learn the art of retail seduction. The devices at work here go well beyond the photos of voluptuous models in lacy bras. They're the same as the tactics deployed in every store from Kmart to Kenneth Cole: implied narratives that allude to the fact that a better life is just a purchase away. Dressers are used instead of display racks, giving the impression that you're inside a woman's bedroom. Bras and panties are draped along the wall, playing into the fantasy of a lustful romp. This all works just as well on the women shopping there as it does on the men browsing for their mates.

The idea is to short-circuit logic. In a UCLA-George Washington University brain-scan study last year, ads touting specific product attributes—facts, figures, or specific claims—activated key decision-making brain regions, including the amygdala and the orbitofrontal cortex. Ads that avoided product attributes and focused instead on sexual imagery or narrative and other emotional triggers led to significantly less activation of the rational thought centers. "When marketing bypasses these parts of the brain, you're more likely to make impulsive decisions," says study author Clay Warren, Ph.D.

Your defense  
Sleep on it

The instinct to take immediate action grew from prehistoric man's battle for food and sex, but now we're applying it to items like coats and watches. The solution is simple: Set a price—\$30, say—and make a rule that you won't buy anything with a price above that amount unless you've considered the purchase for at least 24 hours. "If you remove yourself from the impulsive buying situation, you're better able to weigh the decision rationally," says Ian Cook, M.D., a UCLA psychiatry professor and researcher.