

The hand of God in the Consumer Buying Cycle

Author : Marina Krakovsky

Date : October 27, 2015



Do Mentions of God Persuade Consumers to Buy?

What does God have to do with the risks people are willing to take? The answer, new research suggests, depends on the nature of the risk.

All risky acts, from starting a new business to driving above the speed limit, hold out the possibility of either a good outcome or a bad one — but some risks are more morally laden than others. Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step programs talk about a higher power to help addicts overcome their risky behaviors; this is consistent with some past research that shows that religious people are less prone to take moral risks, or the kinds of risks that might trigger God's disapproval.

Yet with risks that don't have such a moral element — skydiving or investing in a speculative stock, for example — the opposite is true, according to a series of studies by a team of **Stanford GSB** scholars, including professors [Kristin Laurin](#) and [Jonathan Levav](#). "God is commonly viewed as a source of security," and feeling secure can make potential negative outcomes seem both less likely and less severe, the researchers write. If you believe that God will protect you from harm, then nonmoral risks will seem to have more upside than downside, thus making them more attractive.

A lot of people who say they don't believe in God, if you get into it with them, there's some uncertainty there. Kristin Laurin

It's impossible to say in a general way whether that's a good thing or not, says **Laurin**, an assistant professor of organizational behavior: The optimal level of risk-taking varies greatly from one situation to another, and it may not even be known in advance. But one thing is certain: "Most people wouldn't say they would take a risk just because they happen to be thinking about God right now," **Laurin** says. "That's not a factor that people would want to go into their decision making." Yet it did affect people's choices in these experiments.

Remarkably, [the research](#) didn't find the effect only among believers — finding it even among people who said they don't believe in God. In one experiment conducted on **Facebook**, the

researchers presented users with two slightly different versions of an ad for a local adventure: both urging users to click the ad to “find skydiving near you” and “feel the thrill.” But one ad said, “You don’t know what you’re missing!” while the other said, “God knows what you’re missing!” People who saw the “God” version of the ad clicked more often. A pair of ads for an immoral risk — “Learn how to Bribe with little risk of being caught!” — revealed the opposite pattern, with the God version attracting fewer clicks. When the advertised activity carried no risk at all — an ad for video games — the mention of God had no effect one way or the other.

“A lot of people who say they don’t believe in God, if you get into it with them, there’s some uncertainty there,” **Laurin** explains. The fact that people are responding to these reminders of God shows that latent beliefs about God’s reputed powers are holding sway.

The “God knows” in these ads is just a figure of speech, yet it seems to remind people of God’s protection nonetheless. In another experiment, the research team, led by PhD student [Daniella M. Kuper](#), found that when a risk that participants took in the lab didn’t pan out, the participants who had been primed with reminders of God showed more negative feelings toward God than participants who had not been primed to think of God. That’s evidence that participants had expected God to protect them from such bad outcomes.

Together, these studies add to the mounting evidence that factors outside one’s conscious awareness can affect decisions. This insight might prove helpful for those in a position to influence other people’s decisions, such as a manager wishing to encourage employees to pursue bold ideas, a financial advisor nudging clients toward a slightly less conservative portfolio, or a marketer introducing a new product. Use of the word “God” could be just one more tool in a marketer’s toolbox, **Laurin** says, and it doesn’t have to be heavy-handed.

“There are tons of colloquial expressions we use to refer to God,” she points out — think of phrases like “Oh my God,” for example. People don’t necessarily think about God in any conscious way when they see such expressions. “But if what we found is true, then those are the kinds of phrases you might use if you’re **advertising** a risky product like an outdoor adventure.” This kind of messaging could help overcome consumers’ hesitance to try unfamiliar products of any kind, adds **Jonathan Levav**, an associate professor of **marketing**. New products, particularly really new products, are inherently risky, he points out, because buyers aren’t certain about their quality and performance. “So as a way to get people to try them more readily, you might try to slip in some God mentions, and now, as a result, the product will feel safer than it otherwise would.”

//