On aisle time:
How nonconscious decision-making powers in-store sales



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You just ran out of orange juice.

You're popping into your local grocery store to grab a bottle of OJ — and maybe nothing else. But before you've even passed through the doors, you've already made a dozen choices without realizing it. You defaulted to this store. You know where the juice is. You grabbed a cart even though you're "just running in." Welcome to the nonconscious zone.

What is nonconscious decision making?

It's the automatic, emotional, fast-brain part of the consumer experience. You're not just making logical comparisons in-aisle — you're reacting to environmental triggers, visual design, memory and even mood. While conscious decisions are deliberate and slow, nonconscious ones are swift, habitual and often invisible to the shopper themselves.

The shopping environment is more complex than ever. Attention spans are shrinking. Brand competition is fierce. And while consumer behavioral research has become more sophisticated, many marketers still rely too heavily on what people say they'll do, versus how they actually behave.

This is the untapped power of the nonconscious brain. And the smartest marketers are starting to unlock it.

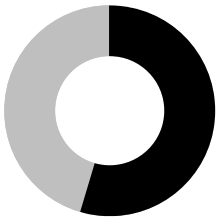
Entering the store

Sensory cues shape your pace, mood and mindset the moment you cross the threshold.

- Upbeat music speeds up your stride.
- Cooler lighting subconsciously suggests "freshness."
- The scent of baked bread? Suddenly you're hungrier than you thought.

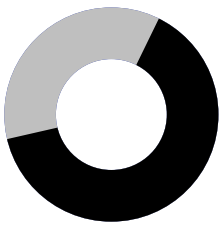
In-store digital signage catches your eye. A bright display flashes, promoting granola bars available for a limited time. You barely register it, but it's enough to lodge the idea.

Default bias kicks in: You turn left and head to the produce aisle. You're not here for veg, but you always start in this section.



51% of shoppers say experiencing products firsthand is the top reason they shop in-store.

Source: Criteo, as reported by eMarketer



63% of shoppers say they've made an unplanned purchase because of in-store digital screens.

Source: Quad consumer eye-tracking study (2025)



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"Understanding why a shopper looks is just as critical as knowing where they look."

—Shannon Anderson, Director of Client Research, Accelerated Marketing Insights by Quad

The juice aisle

Visual hierarchy drives your eye to the center shelf. Eye-level = higher consideration. That's prime real estate.

Make it easy for them: At Quad's Greenville testing facility, the Accelerated Marketing Insights team ran a series of packaging tests for a beauty brand. Through controlled, in-context retail environment testing, they discovered that the brand's packaging performed twice as well when moved from a lower shelf to the top shelf regardless of the design. Insights like these empower brands and retailers to make small, strategic changes that drive meaningful results and capture incremental purchases others miss.

Familiarity bias pulls your focus toward the orange bottle you always buy. It's muscle memory.

Curiosity is triggered when your gaze catches a new green-labeled bottle. It's sleek. Feels healthy. But do you trust it?

Loss aversion creeps in. You don't want to risk a bad breakfast. You reach for the orange bottle you know and trust.

Seeing isn't buying: When testing a new green package for an orange juice brand, Quad's Accelerated Marketing Insights team saw a spike in visual attention — but not a single purchase. Through follow-up qualitative research, they uncovered that the green design was so out of place in the context of the competitive set as to cause discomfort and distrust of the brand. It's a clear reminder that attention alone isn't enough.

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The detour

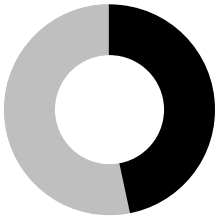
You're heading to checkout, but on your way, you spot an in-aisle digital display showcasing granola bars available for a limited time.

The detour is not a dramatic change of plans. It's a small shift in attention, created by what appears in the shopper's path and how quickly the message communicates value.

Picture superiority effect kicks in. You weren't planning on granola bars. But the package has a close-up image of an irresistibly crunchy bar. Your eyes move before your hand does.

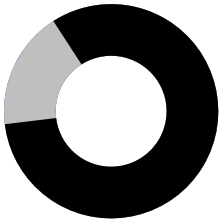
The image works because it makes the product easier to recognize, understand and imagine in the moment. The message doesn't need to explain everything. It simply gives the shopper enough information to pause and reconsider what they came in to buy.

Scarcity bias adds urgency. "Limited time" flashes across a digital sign. Into the cart it goes.



48% of consumers say they've visited an area of the store they weren't planning to visit to view content on a digital screen.

Source: Quad consumer eye-tracking study (2025)



87% of shoppers prefer digital signage content that includes meal or product imagery.

Source: Quad consumer eye-tracking study (2025)

In-Store Connect by Quad (ISCQ) creates the in-store digital touchpoints that support these moments of consideration. Accelerated Marketing Insights (AMI) helps identify which content, imagery and placement are most effective at earning attention and influencing behavior. When message, imagery and placement work in harmony, a new choice can feel like a natural part of the trip.

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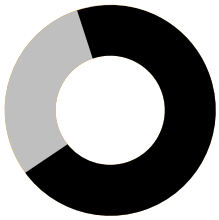


The experience

You leave the store with the orange juice you came for and a new pre-workout snack to try. The trip felt easy, but not purely transactional. You found what you needed, noticed something relevant and made a choice that felt useful.

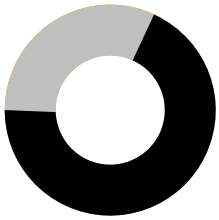
Nothing about the experience felt forced. The packaging made the product easy to understand. Its placement made it easy to notice. The digital message inspired you to consider it. Each choice supported the next, creating a shopping experience that felt intuitive and rewarding.

Over time, these small moments do more than influence what goes into the basket. They shape brand preference, build familiarity and give shoppers a reason to return.



71% of consumers say in-store experiences deepen their emotional connection to brands.

Source: The Harris Poll "Return of Touch" research, presented by Quad



72% of shoppers said packaging design made them more likely to buy.

Source: Quad's AMI Craft Beer Study

Key takeaways

Shopping trips often feel planned, while many decisions happen unconsciously. Every in-store purchase is shaped by multiple touchpoints working together.

Successful marketers optimize:

- Packaging and product design
- Shelf placement and competitive context
- Retail signage and promotional messaging
- In-store retail media creative
- The complete shopper experience

Quad helps brands and retailers make the nonconscious work for marketers.

Understand shopper behavior
Eye tracking and heat maps reveal what shoppers notice, what they ignore and what influences purchase.

Validate the complete retail experience
Store Visualizer recreates real shopping environments so brands and retailers can holistically evaluate packaging, shelf placement, promotions and competitive context.

Make confident decisions
Behavioral insights reduce guesswork and strengthen creative, placement and in-store marketing decisions.

Optimize creative
AMI's comprehensive testing platform evaluates packaging, static signage and in-store retail media messaging to identify what earns attention and influences consideration.

Bring inspiration into the aisle
ISCQ was built from the ground up to serve eye-catching, relevant digital retail media that captures attention, builds interest and supports shoppers as they make real-time decisions.

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