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The Cost of Consumer Fibbing: Can It Hurt to Tell a Little White Lie?

Consumers who tell little white lies to avoid confrontation might find themselves rewarding the people who inconvenienced them, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

“Most consumers have told an inquiring server that their cold meal is fine, a hairdresser that they like their unexpected ‘new look,’ or a friend that his/her too-snug jeans look great,” write authors Jennifer J. Argo (University of Alberta) and Baba Shiv (Stanford University). But according to the researchers, white lies have negative repercussions for the people who tell them.

In one study, the authors studied consumers who had been made to wait for an unpleasant amount of time. The participants then lied about how they were doing by saying they were fine. These consumers evaluated their wait experiences more favorably than people who didn’t lie and were more likely to help the people who delayed them—when they were reminded that they should be honest.

In two additional studies the authors demonstrated that this favorable reaction toward the “wrongdoer” occurred because people who are reminded that they should be honest and yet tell a lie experience “negative affect” (emotion).

“One way to reduce this negative affect is to misconstrue the experience by responding favorably toward the person who created the negative experience,” the authors explain. “Indeed, the effects only arise when consumers feel certain about the negative affect they are experiencing and they are certain about the cause of the negative affect (i.e., the white lie).”

For consumers, it is important to know that the negative feelings that arise after telling a white lie can have financial consequences. The authors found that people who told white lies were willing to spend more money for services or tips.

“Thus, Mark Twain’s statement that ‘honesty is the best policy—when there is money in it,’ is very true and consumers should think twice before telling a white lie.”

Jennifer J. Argo and Baba Shiv. “Are White Lies as Innocuous as We Think?” *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2012 (published online July 22, 2011). For more information, contact the author at jennifer.argo@ualberta.ca or visit <http://ejcr.org>.

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