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Why Do the Abbotts Wait, While the Zimmermans Rush to Buy?

The first letter of our childhood surname determines much about our consumer behavior as grownups, according to a new study in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

Why are some people more likely than others to wait in line overnight to buy a just-released book or to queue up for the new iPad? “The tendency to act quickly to acquire items such as those above is related to the first letter of one’s childhood surname,” write authors Kurt A. Carlson (Georgetown University) and Jacqueline M. Conard (Belmont University).

The authors studied how quickly adults responded to opportunities to acquire items of value to them. They found that the later in the alphabet people’s childhood surnames were, the faster those consumers responded to purchase opportunities. The “last-name effect” occurred when the items were real (basketball tickets, cash, and wine) or hypothetical (sale on a backpack).

The effect occurred only with childhood surnames, not names that had changed due to marriage. Children with last names that fall late in the alphabet are often at the end of lines or at the back of the class. “The idea holds that children develop time-dependent responses based on the treatment they receive,” the authors explain. “In an effort to account for these inequities, children late in the alphabet will move quickly when last name isn’t a factor; they will ‘buy early.’ Likewise, those with last names early in the alphabet will be so accustomed to being first that that individual opportunities to make a purchase won’t matter very much; they will ‘buy late.’”

“The last-name effect is especially important to retailers and salespeople because customer names are easy for marketers to obtain and because there are many decisions in which the decision is not whether to buy, but when to buy,” the authors write.

Whether it’s shopping at a clearance sale, choosing a seat to hear live music, or shopping for produce at a farmers’ market, late alphabet consumers want to make sure they’re the first in line.

Kurt A. Carlson and Jacqueline M. Conard. “The Last Name Effect: How Last Name Influences Acquisition Timing.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2011. Further information: <http://ejcr.org>.

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