The Psychology of Free

Why We Want Things That Cost Nothing | Level B1 | EnglishBridges.com

Before You Read

Discuss these questions with a partner.

1. What is the last thing you got for free? Did you really need it?
2. Have you ever started a free trial for an app or a streaming service? What happened when the trial ended?
3. How might people react differently to free offers, depending on their age, their income, or the country they live in?

Reading: The Psychology of Free

Imagine you are walking through a shopping mall. A young man is giving away free keychains. You do not need one, but the offer looks **tempting**, and soon you are in the line, ready to **grab** one too. Why do free things pull us so strongly?

Researchers in the United States tested this with chocolate. They sold a fancy truffle for 15 cents and a cheap chocolate for 1 cent. Most buyers made a **rational** choice, and about three in four chose the truffle. Then the researchers lowered both prices by one cent. Now the cheap chocolate was free, and about seven in ten buyers took it. The difference in price was exactly the same.

This is called the zero price effect. When something costs a little, we think about the **downside**. When it costs nothing, we stop thinking carefully. In a well-known story, Amazon offered free delivery in many countries, and sales went up. In France, delivery cost about 20 cents, and sales did not rise until it became free. Free gifts also make many of us feel that we **owe** something back. In one restaurant study, customers who got a small piece of chocolate with their bill left bigger tips. Free samples in stores feel **generous**, and they can **boost** sales for weeks.

Free trials work in a different way. You **sign up** and type in your card details. When the trial ends, the **subscription** starts, and the company begins to **charge** you every month. Many people pay for services they meant to **cancel**. Since 2022, German websites must have a clear cancel button, and a 2024 UK law will **require** reminders before a free trial ends. Free apps often make money from **advertisers** and from your data. In free mobile games, only a tiny **fraction** of players spend real money.

Free things are not always bad, but it helps to slow down. Ask yourself: would I want this if it cost a little? Set a reminder before a free trial ends, so you do not end up paying by accident. And when a free offer is hard to **resist**, imagine it costs one cent.

Vocabulary: Fill in the Blank

Complete each sentence with a word or phrase from the box. Use each one once.

fraction	**boost**	**rational**	**cancel**	**tempting**	**grab**	**charge**	**downside**	**generous**	**sign up**
owe	**require**	**subscription**	**advertisers**						

1. The free cake at the cafe looked very _____, so I took a piece.
2. Can you _____ some napkins from the counter before we sit down?
3. Choosing a phone after comparing prices is a _____ decision.
4. The only _____ of the apartment is that it is far from the station.
5. You drove me to the airport, so I _____ you a favor.
6. It was very _____ of you to pay for everyone's lunch.
7. A new coat of paint can _____ the value of a house.
8. Did you _____ for the running club? The first meeting is on Monday.
9. I pay for a monthly _____ to a film website.
10. How much do they _____ for a room with a sea view?
11. The airline had to _____ the flight because of the snow.
12. Many jobs _____ a driving license.
13. The company lost several _____ when its website became less popular.
14. He bought the old car for a _____ of its real price.

Word Partners: Collocations and Word Families

Part A. Collocations

Match the two halves to make common phrases. Write the letter on the line.

1. a tempting	_____	**a.** a seat
2. grab	_____	**b.** subscription
3. a rational	_____	**c.** offer
4. owe someone	_____	**d.** decision
5. boost	_____	**e.** of the price
6. cancel a	_____	**f.** sales
7. a fraction	_____	**g.** urge
8. resist the	_____	**h.** a favor

Now choose three of the phrases and write your own sentences.

Part B. Word families

Complete each sentence with the correct form of the word in brackets.

1. Free samples are a big _____ for hungry shoppers. (*tempting*)
2. Try to think _____ before you sign up for anything. (*rational*)
3. We were surprised by the _____ of the people in the village. (*generous*)
4. A reminder email is now a legal _____ in some countries. (*require*)
5. If you change your mind, you can ask for a _____ within 14 days. (*cancel*)
6. The free app shows a lot of _____ between videos. (*advertisers*)

Comprehension Questions

Answer in full sentences.

1. What is the young man in the shopping mall doing, and why do people join the line?

2. In the first chocolate test, what did the two chocolates cost, and which one did most buyers choose?
3. What changed in the second test, and what happened?
4. What is the zero price effect? Explain it in your own words.
5. What happened to Amazon's sales in France, according to the story?
6. Why do free gifts make many people want to give something back? Give the example from the restaurant.
7. How does a free trial make money for a company?
8. What have Germany and the UK done about subscriptions?
9. Which piece of advice at the end do you think is the most useful? Give a reason.
10. **True, False, or Not Given:** *"In the second chocolate test, the price difference between the two chocolates became bigger."* Explain your answer using the reading.
11. **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes that all free offers are bad for people."* Explain your answer using the reading.
12. **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer tell the story about Amazon in France? Is it (a) to show that a very small price can stop people from buying, (b) to compare shops in France and the United States, or (c) to explain why delivery is expensive?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false). Be ready to correct the false sentences.

1. The person in the mall really needed a new keychain. **T / F**
2. In the first test, the truffle cost 15 cents. **T / F**
3. When the cheap chocolate became free, most buyers still chose the truffle. **T / F**
4. In the story, sales in France went up when delivery became free. **T / F**
5. Customers who got chocolate with their bill left smaller tips. **T / F**
6. Free samples in stores can boost sales for weeks. **T / F**
7. You usually start a free trial without giving any card details. **T / F**
8. German websites that sell subscriptions must have a clear cancel button. **T / F**
9. Most players of free mobile games spend real money. **T / F**
10. The writer suggests setting a reminder before a free trial ends. **T / F**

Language Focus: Phrasal Verbs (give away, sign up, end up, slow down)

A **phrasal verb** is a verb + a small word (*up*, *down*, *away*, *out*). Together they have a new meaning.

give away = give for free **sign up (for)** = join **end up + -ing** = finally do something you did not plan **slow down** = do something less quickly

From the reading:

"A young man is **giving away** free keychains."

"Set a reminder before a free trial ends, so you do not **end up** paying by accident."

Tip: After *end up*, use the *-ing* form: *I ended up buying two.* After *sign up*, use *for* + noun: *I signed up for a class.*

Part A. Sentence starters

Finish each sentence so that it is true for you.

1. When I go shopping, I often end up _____
2. The last thing I signed up for was _____
3. Something I gave away recently was _____
4. When I feel stressed, I slow down by _____
5. If a friend picks up the bill at dinner, I usually _____

Part B. Questions

Answer each question in a full sentence. Try to answer using a phrasal verb from the box. Then ask a partner.

6. What did you sign up for when you were a child?
7. What do you do with clothes that you no longer wear?
8. Have you ever bought something you did not plan to buy? What happened?
9. What helps you relax after a busy day?
10. Who usually pays when you eat out with friends?

Discussion Questions

Discuss with a partner or in a small group. Give reasons and examples.

1. Do you often take free things, such as pens, samples, or keychains? What do you do with them?
2. What is the best thing you ever got for free?
3. Have you ever forgotten to cancel a subscription? How did you feel when you noticed?
4. Which free apps do you use every day? Would you pay for any of them?
5. Do free samples in shops make you more likely to buy something? Why or why not?
6. When someone gives you a gift, do you feel that you must give something back?
7. Do you think the chocolate test would have the same result in your country? Why?
8. Have you ever spent money in a free mobile game? What did you buy, and why?
9. Should companies be allowed to give free gifts, such as toys, to children in order to sell them products?
10. Is it fair for companies to use free offers to get people's card details?
11. Are you happy to see advertisements in return for a free app, or would you rather pay?
12. Free things are sometimes paid for with our data. How much do you worry about this?
13. Some people say that nothing is really free. Do you agree?
14. Should governments protect people from their own mistakes, such as forgetting to cancel a trial, or should people be responsible for themselves?

Online Practice

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