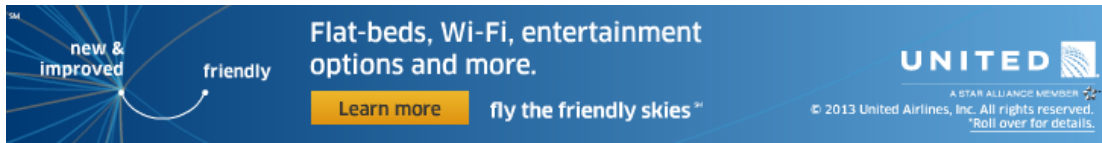




Get Forbes Investor - Save 75%

**Kashmir Hill**, Forbes Staff

Welcome to The Not-So Private Parts where technology & privacy collide

Follow (1,535)

Follow

<230k

TECH | 2/16/2012 @ 11:02AM | 2,192,313 views

How Target Figured Out A Teen Girl Was Pregnant Before Her Father Did

324 comments, 169 called-out

Comment Now

ents

Every time you go shopping, you share intimate details about your consumption patterns with retailers. And many of those retailers are studying those details to figure out what you like, what you need, and which coupons are most likely to make you happy. [Target](#), for example, has figured out how to data-mine its way into your womb, to figure out whether you have a baby on the way long before you need to start buying diapers.



Target has got you in its aim

Charles Duhigg outlines in the [New York Times](#) how Target tries to hook parents-to-be at that crucial moment before they turn into rampant — and loyal — buyers of all things pastel, plastic, and miniature. He talked to Target statistician Andrew Pole — before Target freaked out and cut off all communications — about the clues to a customer's impending bundle of joy. Target assigns every customer a Guest ID number, tied to their credit card, name, or email address that becomes a bucket that stores a history of everything they've bought and any demographic information Target has collected from them or bought from other sources. Using that, Pole looked at historical buying data for all the ladies who had signed up for Target baby registries in the past. From the [NYT](#):

[Pole] ran test after test, analyzing the data, and before long some useful patterns emerged. Lotions, for example. Lots of people buy lotion, but one of Pole's colleagues noticed that women on the baby registry were buying larger quantities of unscented lotion around the beginning of their second trimester. Another analyst noted that



Most Read on Forbes

[NEWS](#) [People](#) [Places](#) [Companies](#)

Facebook Is Losing Teens, And New Privacy Settings Won't Bring Them Back +41,966 views

My Frustrating Upgrade To Windows 8.1 +32,750 views

Obama's New White House

Also On Forbes

Apparently Apple's iPhone 5c Is A Failure Already

4.7k

Sleep 'Detoxes' The Brain, New Research Suggests +23,637 views

[+ show more](#)**Kashmir Hill**

Forbes Staff

Follow (1,535)

I'm a privacy pragmatist, writing about the intersection of law, technology, social media and our personal information. If you have story ideas or tips, e-mail me at khill@forbes.com. PGP key [here](#). These days, I'm a senior online editor at Forbes. I

[+ show more](#)



Don't Want To Be Targeted By Target? There's An Opt Out.

Kashmir Hill
Forbes Staff



Could Target Sell Its 'Pregnancy Prediction Score'?

Kashmir Hill
Forbes Staff

“sometime in the first 20 weeks, pregnant women loaded up on supplements like calcium, magnesium and zinc. Many shoppers purchase soap and cotton balls, but when someone suddenly starts buying lots of scent-free soap and extra-big bags of cotton balls, in addition to hand sanitizers and washcloths, it signals they could be getting close to their delivery date.

Or have a rather nasty infection...

“As Pole’s computers crawled through the data, he was able to identify about 25 products that, when analyzed together, allowed him to assign each shopper a “pregnancy prediction” score. More important, he could also estimate her due date to within a small window, so Target could send coupons timed to very specific stages of her pregnancy.

One Target employee I spoke to provided a hypothetical example. Take a fictional Target shopper named Jenny Ward, who is 23, lives in [Atlanta](#) and in March bought cocoa-butter lotion, a purse large enough to double as a diaper bag, zinc and magnesium supplements and a bright blue rug. There’s, say, an 87 percent chance that she’s pregnant and that her delivery date is sometime in late August.

via [How Companies Learn Your Secrets – NYTimes.com](#).

And perhaps that it’s a boy based on the color of that rug?

So Target started sending coupons for baby items to customers according to their pregnancy scores. Duhigg shares an anecdote — so good that it sounds made up — that conveys how eerily accurate the

targeting is. An angry man went into a Target outside of Minneapolis, demanding to talk to a manager:

“My daughter got this in the mail!” he said. “She’s still in high school, and you’re sending her coupons for baby clothes and cribs? Are you trying to encourage her to get pregnant?”

The manager didn’t have any idea what the man was talking about. He looked at the mailer. Sure enough, it was addressed to the man’s daughter and contained advertisements for maternity clothing, nursery furniture and pictures of smiling infants. The manager apologized and then called a few days later to apologize again.



Target knows before it shows.

(Nice customer service, Target.)

“On the phone, though, the father was somewhat abashed. “I had a talk with my daughter,” he said. “It turns out there’s been some activities in my house I haven’t been completely aware of. She’s due in August. I owe you an apology.”

What Target discovered fairly quickly is that it creeped people out that the company knew about their pregnancies in advance.

KASHMIR HILL'S POPULAR POSTS

How Target Figured Out A Teen Girl Was Pregnant Before Her Father Did 2,192,093 views

Oops. Mark Zuckerberg's Sister Has A Private Facebook Photo Go Public. 983,256 views

Beware, Tech Abandoners. People Without Facebook Accounts Are 'Suspicious.' 558,592 views

10 Incredibly Simple Things You Should Be Doing To Protect Your Privacy 435,287 views

Every Important Person In Bitcoin Just Got Subpoenaed By New York's Financial Regulator 333,723 views

MORE FROM KASHMIR HILL



Follow Forbes Writers and Topics

Get email alerts when new posts are published.

Sign up now »



“If we send someone a catalog and say, ‘Congratulations on your first child!’ and they’ve never told us they’re pregnant, that’s going to make some people uncomfortable,” Pole told me. “We are very conservative about compliance with all privacy laws. **But even if you’re following the law, you can do things where people get queasy.**”



Target's Andrew Pole (from LinkedIn)

Bold is mine. That's a quote for our times.

So Target got sneakier about sending the coupons. The company can create personalized booklets; instead of sending people with high pregnancy scores books o' coupons solely for diapers, rattles, strollers, and the “Go the F*** to Sleep” book, they more subtly spread them about:

“Then we started mixing in all these ads for things we knew pregnant women would never buy, so the baby ads looked random. We’d put an ad for a lawn mower next to diapers. We’d put a coupon for wineglasses next to infant clothes. That way, it looked like all the products were chosen by chance.

“And we found out that as long as a pregnant woman thinks she hasn’t been spied on, she’ll use the coupons. She just assumes that everyone else on her block got the same mailer for diapers and cribs. As long as we don’t spook her, it works.”

via [How Companies Learn Your Secrets – NYTimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/16/how-target-figured-out-a-teen-girl-was-pregnant-before-her-father-did/).

So the Target philosophy towards expecting parents is similar to the first date philosophy? Even if you’ve fully stalked the person on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/) and [Google](https://www.google.com/) beforehand, pretend like you know less than you do so as not to creep the person out.

Duhigg suggests that Target’s gangbusters revenue growth — \$44 billion in 2002, when Pole was hired, to \$67 billion in 2010 — is attributable to Pole’s helping the retail giant corner the baby-on-board market, citing company president Gregg Steinhafel boasting to investors about the company’s “heightened focus on items and categories that appeal to specific guest segments such as mom and baby.”

Target was none too happy about Duhigg’s plans to write this story. They refused to let him go to Target headquarters. When he flew out anyway, he discovered he was on a list of prohibited visitors.

I think most readers of the [excellent piece](#) will find it both unsettling and unsurprising. With all the talk these days about the data grab most companies are engaged in, Target’s collection and analysis seem as expected as its customers’ babies. But with their analysis moving into areas as sensitive as pregnancy, and so accurately, who knows how else they might start profiling Target shoppers? The store’s bulls-eye logo may now send a little shiver of fear down the closely-watched spines of some, though I can promise you that Target is not the only store doing this. Those people chilled by stores’ tracking and profiling them may want to consider going the way of the common criminal — and paying for far more of their purchases in cash.

A must read: [How Companies Learn Your Secrets](#) [New York Times] drawn from Charles Duhigg’s forthcoming book, [The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business](#)



- See Also:
- [Sales Management Training](#)[Database Software](#)
- [Retail Business Software](#)[Retail Inventory Control](#)
- [Customer Service Tips](#)[Customer Service Skills](#)
- [Retail Business Plans](#)[Data Management Courses](#)



324 comments, 169 called-out

[Comment Now](#)[Follow Comments](#)

39.6k

Tweet

15.5k

5.9k

365

4.7k


2.4k

Print

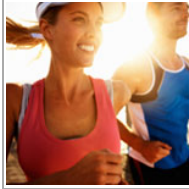
Report Corrections

Reprints & Permissions

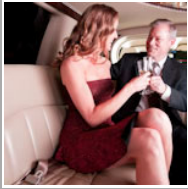
From Around the Web




New Tech Lets You Speak a Language in 10 Days




Revolutionary Health Drink Boosts Energy, Endurance & Work




How Penny Stocks Create Millionaires Every Day




How Cruise Lines Fill All Those Unsold Cruise Cabins




Tricks Car Insurance Agents Don't Want You to Know



How New iPads are Selling for Under \$40



New Exercises Can Strengthen Brain



3 Ways Guys Can Drop 20lbs. Quickly

ADVERTISER VIDEO



Post Your Comment

Please **log in** or **sign up** to comment.



Enter Your Comment

Forbes writers have the ability to call out member comments they find particularly interesting. Called-out comments are highlighted across the Forbes network. You'll be notified if your comment is called out.

Comments

CALLLED-OUT

[Expand All Comments](#)

[Follow Comments](#)



Sight Wire 1 year ago

I'll never shop there again.

Called-out comment

[Reply](#)



successfulworkplace 1 year ago

Just don't think Target is alone in this. If you stop shopping everywhere this is happening, you'll have a short list of places to go.

Called-out comment

[Reply](#)



Kashmir Hill, Forbes Staff 1 year ago

Author

Successfulworkplace has it right here. Tracking and data-mining are standard business practices now. To avoid it, consumers have to put in serious effort: Don't give out information when asked (like your zip code, email or phone number). Don't use loyalty cards. Use cash instead of credit. Never shop online...

For most of us, though, convenience (and savings) are worth more than privacy.

Called-out comment

[Reply](#)



kitten ku'upio 1 year ago

They are all that way, you can't opt out of it unless you shop in cash ONLY, no checks, no debit cards, no credit cards, and never ever never return anything anywhere. All the major stores are this way now.

Called-out comment

[Reply](#)



David Haley 1 year ago

This isn't a bad thing, necessarily. The concept of presenting discounts and coupons on items we will need (i.e. diapers if pregnant) is beneficial to the consumers pockets. Target gets the business for investing in the research instead of the consumer heading to a competitor's store.

Now sending a "congrats your preggo" coupon book is not going to bide well with consumers.

Called-out comment

[Reply](#)



Bill Conerly, Contributor 1 year ago

And if you run a business, know that your competitors are doing this.

As a consumer, I (pretty much) like the trend. Sending me a coupon for golf balls is a waste, but sending me a coupon for sailing gear would be a winner.

Called-out comment

[Reply](#)

+ expand comment



Joe Zydeco 1 year ago

See those sharing links that Forbes installed on the left side of the page? Are you logged into Facebook right now? If you are, or even if you were recently, then Facebook knows you visited this page. They'll collect and analyze that data and sell it.

And Forbes.com just helped them. So while you're reading these comments and getting upset at the new commercial/social media universe, you're also participating in it.

Called-out comment

[Reply](#)



Luciano Moretti 1 year ago

Don't think everyone and their brother isn't mining all the data they can from you. Why do you think stores want you to use "reward cards"?

The only way to avoid this is to pay everything in cash and don't give your name to any store.

Called-out comment

[Reply](#)

+ expand comment



Dave Wilson 1 year ago

They all do it. Don't be psychotic. If you want to stay anonymous, use cash with every transaction and reject all offers of frequent shopper cards, however, be prepared to pay more.

Called-out comment

[Reply](#)



Megan Starshak 1 year ago

Why would this discourage you from shopping (aside from the author's final tone making this seem creepier than it is). There's a difference between a guy in a bulls-eye logo ninja suit sitting in your bushes and spying on you and your lifestyle, and a guy in an office running a statistical analysis on thousands of customers' shopping patterns. It's no different then when you log into Amazon and it tells you similar things that customers have purchased based on your shopping cart. It's designed to sell you what you need, and not what you don't. They don't care about your deep dark secrets, they care about being a better retailer than W-mart.

Called-out comment

[Reply](#)

+ expand 4 comments

[1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) ... [17](#)

[Follow Comments](#)

Inside Forbes



FORBES' List Of America's Best Business Schools 2013

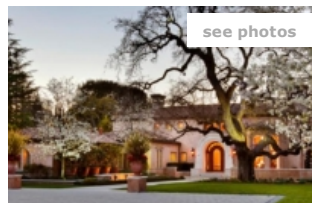
Forbes ranking of MBA programs found that the degree still pays off at our top 25 U.S. programs--just not as fast.



Ashton Kutcher Tops List Of TV's Highest-Paid Actors



The Basic Reason Why Obamacare Site Is Failing



Homes In America's 50 Most Expensive Zip Codes



Real-Time Billionaires

Channels

Business
Investing
Technology
Entrepreneurs
Op/Ed
Leadership
Lifestyle
Lists

Company Info

Forbes Careers
Advertising Information
Forbes Press Room
Forbes Newsfeeds
Investment Newsletters
Reprints & Permissions
Terms and Conditions
Privacy Statement
Contact Us
Sitemap
Help

Affiliate Sites

Forbes China
Forbes India
Forbes Israel
Forbes Mexico
Forbes Middle East
Forbes Poland
Forbes Romania
Forbes Russia
Forbes Ukraine
RealClear Politics
RealClear Markets
RealClear World
RealClear Sports

Forbes Conferences

Forbes Asia's Power Business Women
Forbes Women's Summit
Forbes 400 Philanthropy Summit
Global CEO Conference
Forbes Healthcare Summit
Forbes CMO Summit
Forbes Asia's Best Under A Billion
Techonomy
Forbes Innovators
Forbes and NAPFA Advisor iConference
Forbes Reinventing America Summit

Publications



Free Trial Issue
Subscriber Services
Buy Back Issues

Data Partners

Market Data by Morningstar
Thomson Reuters
AdChoices