SHOPPING & PRICING

How much did you spend to get free shipping?

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THE MARKETING AT WORK

A free-shipping threshold gives the basket a new goal: reach the number. The offer can shift your attention from whether you need another item to how little more you need to spend. Extra merchandise can feel like getting value, while delivery feels like wasting money—even when avoiding the fee means paying more overall.

Last Christmas, while decorating the tree with Astrid, I broke an ornament I loved.

I found a replacement in the clearance section of an online store somewhere down south. It was $19. The catch? Free shipping started at $35.

I was no longer shopping for an ornament. I was shopping for another $16.

The store had a fifty percent off Christmas dress for Astrid. Not in her size, but in a size I thought might fit the following year. It was final sale. I bought it anyway and waited for my ornament to arrive.

She will never wear it.

I had become extremely firm about postage and remarkably flexible about the usefulness of a dress.

I knew I was spending more at the time—the math was not difficult. I was spending more to avoid spending. Why did this decision feel so satisfying?

A closer look at the free-shipping effect

Imagine an item is offered for $40 plus a $5 delivery fee. That same item is offered elsewhere for $45 with free delivery. Both offers total $45.

Which do you think shoppers preferred?

A 2026 experiment tested this with shoes. Researchers kept the total price exactly the same and changed only how much of it was assigned to the shoes and how much was assigned to delivery. Participants then answered a very ordinary question: *How much would you want to buy this?* [7]

SAME TOTAL. DIFFERENT SHIPPING FEE.

How Shipping Changed the Appeal of the Same $100 Offer

As more of the same total was labeled “shipping,” people generally wanted to buy the shoes less.

$100 shoes Free shipping	**Wanted to buy most**
$96 shoes $4 shipping	About as appealing as free on the simple rating
$92 shoes $8 shipping	Wanted to buy less
$88 shoes $12 shipping	Wanted to buy less again
$84 shoes	**Wanted to buy least**

$16 shipping

For an easier comparison, the price split is shown as if every offer totaled $100; the actual experiment used a ₩50,000 total. Participants rated the offers on a 4-point scale from “Not at all” to “Very much”—these were not actual purchases. Free shipping scored significantly higher than the three larger shipping fees; free and the smallest fee were not significantly different on the direct rating. The $100 figures preserve the study’s price proportions only—they are not the study’s dollar prices. [7]

Even though these were ratings of offers, not completed purchases, the finding reveals that the way a total bill is assembled can matter. An offer can become more appealing without becoming less expensive.

Free is not merely cheap

Behavioral researchers have found that a price of zero can change a choice more than an ordinary price reduction does. In a series of experiments, Kristina Shampanier, Nina Mazar, and Dan Ariely lowered the prices of two products by the same amount. When the cheaper option became free, people shifted toward it far more than logic would predict. [1]

Their explanation was not that people suddenly forgot arithmetic. Free created a positive feeling of its own. A small price still asks whether the product is worth paying for. Zero removes that downside entirely, and suddenly the free object sits in very persuasive territory.

The research tested free products, not shipping thresholds, so it cannot explain my order by itself. But it helps explain why the zero on the delivery line felt like an achievement rather than a minor change in the total.

I was not only saving a delivery charge. I was getting the very pleasant feeling of having defeated one.

The dress felt like something

A shipping fee and a dress may both remove money from the same bank account. They do not feel like the same purchase.

Economist Richard Thaler described two sources of satisfaction in a transaction. One is the value of what we acquire. The other is the pleasure of believing we made a good deal. He called the second one *transaction utility*. [2]

The dress offered both a thing and a story. It was half off. It might fit later. It would arrive in a box. The delivery charge offered none of this. It was simply the price of getting the ornament I had already decided to buy.

The dress had a discount. Postage had a job. I found the discount more persuasive.

Once those dollars occupied different mental categories, spending more on merchandise could feel better than spending less on delivery. Economically, that makes very little sense if the dress has no use. Psychologically, it is an excellent arrangement. I get an object, a bargain, and a zero where an irritating fee used to be.

The offer changed what counted as reasonable

Free-shipping thresholds are designed to keep a finished shopper shopping. A 2006 analysis of an online retailer found that shipping-fee schedules affected how much customers spent, as well as if they ordered at all. [3]

Later research found something more revealing. In a 2020 study, free-shipping promotions increased spending on products with a higher likelihood of being returned, and the overall return rate rose. The study does not prove why I bought a final-sale dress in a speculative size. It does suggest that free shipping can make shoppers more willing to proceed with purchases carrying more uncertainty. [4]

That was my dress. Not her size. Not for this Christmas. Not something I had planned to buy. Free shipping made one outcome certain—the delivery line would say zero—and allowed almost everything else to become negotiable.

The offer had not hidden the facts. It had changed which facts felt important.

Then I do it again with dinner

I do a more defensible version with groceries. I only need flour, but then I add milk, eggs, and something we will eventually eat so the order qualifies for free delivery. It happens often enough that it barely feels like a decision. Sometimes that is sensible. The groceries replace things I would have bought the next day, and delivery saves a trip.

But the same shift has occurred. I began with dinner. I ended with a spend target.

When did delivery become something to object to?

I suspect my Amazon habit has fueled my objection to paid shipping. When orders repeatedly arrive without a separate delivery charge, I start treating that as how shopping works. So when another shop adds a shipping fee, I am not simply evaluating a service. I am reacting to a departure from normal.

I am not alone. In AlixPartners' 2026 U.S. home-delivery survey, 94% of respondents said free shipping affected their purchase decisions, and more than a quarter expected a zero shipping charge as the baseline. [5]

There is a broader pricing effect here too. In experiments on services that had been free and then introduced a fee, people reacted more negatively to the change: fairness perceptions, attitudes toward the company, and purchase intentions fell. Those studies were not about parcel delivery, but they help explain how a benefit can stop feeling like a bonus and start feeling like the normal deal. [6]

So, for those of us expecting free shipping, a minimum-spend offer presents a convenient solution: buy something else.

The question I use now

At checkout, I try to ask one question: If the delivery charge disappeared either way, would I still add this exact item?

If the answer is yes, the threshold may be helping me combine purchases I already intended to make. If the answer is no, the item is not saving me from shipping. Yet despite understanding the psychology at work, and despite my answer to the question, I am still more likely than not to take the gamble on the holiday dress if it means getting the ornament to my door for “free.” It is what I have agreed to buy instead of shipping.

TRY IT WITH YOUR OWN PURCHASE

Does adding an item actually save you money?

Start with the story’s example, or enter the numbers from your checkout.

Items already in your basket ($)

42

Shipping fee ($)

5.95

Free shipping starts at ($)

50

Price of the item you might add ($)

8

Buy what you planned

$47.95

Including $5.95 delivery

Add the extra item

$50.00

Free delivery

Adding the item costs $2.05 more overall. Decide whether the extra item is worth that to you.

Compares cash paid, before tax or other discounts. Assumes the extra item qualifies toward the shipping threshold and the shipping fee stays the same below it.

▼ Sources + Methodology

Shampanier, Mazar, and Ariely (2007), Zero as a Special Price: The True Value of Free Products

Controlled-choice experiments on free products. The finding supports the special emotional pull of zero; it is not a direct test of free-shipping thresholds or Jude's purchase.

Thaler (1985), Mental Accounting and Consumer Choice

Introduces acquisition utility and transaction utility. Its application to the ornament and dress is an interpretation, not a measured personal cause.

Lewis, Singh, and Fay (2006), An Empirical Study of the Impact of Nonlinear Shipping and Handling Fees on Purchase Incidence and Expenditure Decisions

Retailer-level empirical evidence that shipping-fee schedules affected order incidence and expenditure. One retailer does not establish a universal effect.

Shehu, Papies, and Neslin (2020), Free Shipping Promotions and Product Returns

Purchase and return analysis with field validation. The study supports a relationship between free-shipping promotions, riskier purchases, and returns; it does not diagnose Jude's decision.

AlixPartners, 2026 Home Delivery Survey

Published June 23, 2026; weighted U.S. online survey. The release reports that 94% said free shipping affected purchase decisions and more than 25% expected $0 shipping as a baseline.

Cziehso, Schaefers, and Kukar-Kinney (2019), Free no more—investigating customer reactions to unexpected free-to-fee switches

Three experiments on services moving from free to paid. Unexpected free-to-fee changes reduced perceived fairness, company attitude, and purchase intentions. This is supporting evidence about reference points and fairness, not a parcel-shipping experiment.

Lee et al. (2026), Neural and behavioral evidence of free shipping on consumer decision making

38 analyzed participants in Korea rated shoe offers on a 4-point purchase-intention scale. Every offer totaled ₩50,000, with the product price falling as the shipping fee rose. Free exceeded the ₩4,000, ₩6,000, and ₩8,000 fees on direct ratings; free and ₩2,000 were not significantly different. These were ratings, not purchases.

The $19 ornament, $35 threshold, half-price final-sale dress, and grocery behavior come from Jude’s account. The $16 is the gap to the threshold, not the price of the dress. The delivery charge and paid dress price are not supplied and are not reconstructed. The $40 + $5 example is hypothetical. The $100 chart preserves only the proportions of the study’s ₩50,000 price splits for readability; it does not convert the experiment to a U.S. market or create purchase percentages.