



Why we crave the iPhone 4

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Buzz up!

Apple is **driving people nuts** with its psychology of scarcity. This is why a 25-year-old unemployed man named Justin Wagoner **pitched a tent outside** an Apple Store in Texas last Wednesday – more than a week before the new iPhone would go on sale. “Some would say I’m crazy,” he posted on [MacRumors: Forums](#). In fact, Apple masterfully made him that way.

The iPhone 4 sold out almost immediately after AT&T started taking on-line orders earlier this month. Pre-orders for buying the phone at retail outlets – the phone goes on sale June 24 – have overrun the expected shipments. Yet there is really no good reason for such behavior from consumers. The iPhone 4 has some cool new features – front-facing camera, internal gyroscope, multi-tasking – but it’s hardly a life-altering piece of technology. An excellent new pair of shoes would probably do as much for your personal and professional prospects.



But the iPhone 4 is scarce. More people want it than can get it. That by itself does weird things to people’s brains. It sets off irrational cravings. You may legitimately desire an iPhone 4, but you desire it more if you’re not sure you can get it. It’s like that girl in ninth grade who ignores you all year – she’s way hotter *because* she ignores you.

The scarcity actually makes you feel bad. It eats at you. It impinges on your sense of personal freedom. “Whenever free choice is limited or threatened, the need to retain our freedoms makes us desire them (as well as the goods and services associated with them) significantly more than previously,” writes Robert Cialdini in his book, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. “So when increasing scarcity – or anything else – interferes with our prior access to some item, we will react against the interference by wanting and trying to possess the item more than before.”

The same psychology helped fuel the housing bubble, as multiple buyers bid on the same house. It's why people got in gas lines during the 1970s oil embargo even if they had half a tank and no plans to drive further than the grocery store. It's why consumers scrapped for the first shipments of Beanie Babies, Volkswagen's New Beetle, and Microsoft's Windows 95 – all products that didn't seem so great the morning after. Scarcity is a type of consumer beer goggles.

Of course Apple knows how to use scarcity the way Paris Hilton knows how to use a sex scandal. Apple pulls that trick all the time. Remember the blocks-long lines for the first iPhone? People salivating to get in on the first shipment of iPads? As if *Fortune's* "Most Admired" company of the past three years can invent amazing products, build retail stores, and market the pants off the competition, but isn't smart enough to estimate how much initial demand it will get.



Still, Apple plays innocent. During the spring's iPad frenzy, the media asked Apple spokeswoman Natalie Harrison to comment on whether the long lines and spotty supplies that attracted news coverage were part of the master plan. "Demand for the revolutionary iPad has been incredible," Harrison replied opaquely. "We are working hard to get an iPad into the hands of every customer as quickly as possible."

Apple has good reason to keep any corporate plans for scarcity on the low-down. In some circles, creating scarcity is downright evil. "The psychology of scarcity...produces the feeling that there is never enough, that I am not good enough, that my material station is not good enough, that others are withholding from me the emotional support I need," writes Laurence Boldt in his book *Zen and the Art of Making a Living*. "The psychology of plenty is based upon love and fosters thanksgiving, cooperation, abundance and reverence for life."

The message is clear: If Apple really loved us, it wouldn't manipulate us with scarcity. It would make the iPhone 4 so plentiful it would be as easy to get as a carton of eggs.