You came to Target for toothpaste.

Twenty minutes later, you're standing beside your car with toothpaste, a candle, a phone charger, a snack you apparently needed immediately, and one object you don't even remember putting in the cart. Nothing dramatic happened in there. Nobody cornered you with a presentation on why your life needed a decorative basket.

So the easiest explanation is that you got carried away.

And sometimes, you did.

But that explanation leaves something out. Because Target is not just deciding what products to sell. It is investing in personalization, discovery, store experience, loyalty data, and technology designed to make shopping feel increasingly relevant to the person doing it.

Amazon attacks a different part of the same decision. It spent years making the distance between “I want that” and “it's ordered” smaller.

Starbucks can take something as ordinary as buying coffee and surround it with stored payment, personalized offers, Stars, status levels, and visible progress toward the next reward.

None of these companies can reach inside your skull and press a Buy button.

They don't need to.

Because the more interesting question isn't whether they can control your decisions.

It's how much they can change those decisions by controlling what happens around them.

And to see that, we need to go back inside Target and look at the cart again.

Follow the purchase backward. First, what gets your attention? Then, what removes the pause before buying? And finally, what makes the behavior easier to repeat?

Start with the candle.

You did not walk into the building thinking, “Today feels like a sandalwood emergency.” The candle had to become relevant before it could become desirable. Maybe you passed an endcap. Maybe it sat beside something you were already looking for.

That sounds obvious. Of course placement matters.

But that is exactly why it matters.

A shopping decision does not begin when you say yes. It begins with what gets a chance to enter the competition.

Researchers who study retail environments have repeatedly found that placement and store atmosphere can shape attention and behavior. Online, the same basic principle appears differently. Ranking matters because people do not examine every available option equally. We mostly choose from what gets surfaced.

So the first part of the “brain hack” is not making you love something you hate. It is deciding what gets enough attention to become a candidate in the first place.

And Target has another layer that a shelf label cannot provide: information about the customer.

Target Circle is built around personalized deals and experiences, and the company has said the program gives it useful information about how guests shop. That does not mean Target has a tiny detective following you through produce with a clipboard. It means your relationship with the store can become increasingly informed by what the system has already learned.

That matters because relevance lowers one of the most useful defenses you have as a shopper: irrelevance.

An ad for something you do not care about is easy to ignore. A recommendation that matches your routine, life stage, or recent behavior feels less like advertising and more like help.

And help gets invited much closer to the decision.

Now look back at the cart.

The toothpaste still makes sense. The charger may solve a real problem. The candle is not proof that Target manipulated you. The point is subtler. Every item competed for your attention inside an environment where placement, assortment, promotion, and increasingly personalization can influence which options you notice and how relevant they feel.

That changes the story from “Why am I so weak?” to “What was happening around me when I decided I wanted this?”

That question is much more useful.

It is also only the first layer.

Because getting your attention does not guarantee a sale. You can notice the candle and keep walking. You can want the charger and decide to buy it next week. You can put something in an online cart and then perform the ancient financial ritual of closing the tab and pretending none of this ever happened.

For a seller, there is still a dangerous space between desire and payment.

Amazon became extraordinarily good at shrinking it.

Back in 1999, Amazon received a patent for 1-Click ordering, a system that could use stored billing and shipping information so a customer could place an order with one click.

The technology is old enough to rent a car without the young-driver surcharge, but the idea behind it is still modern: every extra step is another chance for the customer to stop.

Think about a deliberately annoying checkout.

Find the product. Add it to the cart. Create an account. Type your address. Find your wallet. Enter the card. Discover shipping costs. Reconsider your life choices. Leave.

Some of those steps protect you. Some are pointless friction. But from the seller's perspective, both can interrupt the purchase.

So Amazon's genius was not simply showing you more things you might like. It was making action require less effort once you liked one of them.

That is friction reduction.

And friction sounds negative until you notice what it sometimes does for your wallet.

A pause can be irritating when you are ordering batteries. It can also be the moment your brain changes from “Ooh, useful” to “Do I actually need this?”

Remove enough small pauses, and the purchase does not become inevitable. It becomes easier to complete before reconsideration has much time to develop.

Modern Amazon pushes that philosophy beyond checkout. The company says its shopping systems can personalize recommendations using signals such as previous purchases, searches, Lists, reviews, and interactions with its shopping assistant. The storefront is not simply waiting for you to search a catalog. Increasingly, it is trying to reduce the effort involved in figuring out what you might want next.

That can be genuinely useful. If you need printer ink, nobody wins because you spent forty-five minutes comparing fourteen nearly identical black rectangles.

But convenience has two sides.

The same system that saves you from unnecessary effort can also remove useful effort.

And now your Target cart looks a little different.

Target helps determine what becomes noticeable and relevant. Amazon shows what happens after interest exists and the distance between interest and action starts collapsing.

So the problem is already larger than “impulse buying.”

You are looking at a sequence.

Something catches your attention. It feels relevant. Acting on it becomes easy. The transaction disappears into a stored card and a familiar interface. By the time the package arrives, the decision itself may have occupied less mental space than choosing what to watch during dinner.

But buying once is only one kind of victory for a company.

The more valuable question is what happens when the company no longer has to rebuild the decision from zero the next time.

Because Starbucks is not primarily interesting here because it can sell you one coffee.

It is interesting because tomorrow morning, your phone, your Stars, your stored balance, your usual route, and your usual order may all still be waiting for you.

That matters because repetition changes the kind of decision you are making.

The first Starbucks visit can be deliberate. You decide you want coffee, choose the store, open the app, place the order, and pay. But when the same behavior keeps happening in the same context, psychology gives us a more useful word for what can develop: habit.

Habit researchers describe repeated responses in recurring contexts becoming more automatic over time. That does not mean you become a coffee-seeking robot with a debit card. It means the environment itself can start doing some of the reminding.

Same commute, same time, same phone, and usually the same app.

And Starbucks has built a rewards system that gives repetition somewhere visible to go.

Its redesigned U.S. Rewards program has Green, Gold, and Reserve levels. Members accumulate Stars, can track progress in the app, and at higher levels can earn Stars faster and receive additional benefits.

That structure matters because progress can affect behavior even when the reward itself has not changed yet.

In a classic consumer study, researchers gave some customers a loyalty card requiring eight purchases and others a ten-purchase card with two purchases already credited. Both groups effectively needed eight purchases. But the people who appeared to have already started made greater progress toward finishing the program.

The researchers called this the endowed progress effect.

People can become more persistent when a goal feels underway instead of untouched.

Now, that study was not about Starbucks, and it does not prove that a Gold progress bar causes you to buy another latte. But it explains why visible progress is more psychologically interesting than a plain discount.

A discount says, “This costs less.”

Progress says, “You have unfinished business.”

Apparently even coffee can acquire administrative responsibilities.

Then there is payment.

Starbucks reported 34.6 million active U.S. Rewards members and $3.5 billion in U.S. card loads in its first fiscal quarter of 2025. That does not tell us why any individual member bought a drink. It does show the scale of a system where payment, rewards, ordering, and repeat visits can live inside the same digital relationship.

And payment method deserves caution because this is where simple internet explanations tend to become suspiciously confident.

A 2024 meta-analysis combined 71 papers and found a small but significant tendency for people to spend more with cashless methods than with cash. Researchers call this the cashless effect. But the effect varies by context and has weakened over time.

So no, tapping your phone does not automatically turn a five-dollar coffee into a twelve-dollar personality crisis.

The useful point is smaller.

When money becomes less physically visible, while ordering becomes easier and the reward system is already waiting, another little pause can disappear.

Now pull the three companies together.

Target can influence what becomes noticeable and relevant.

Amazon can reduce the effort between wanting and buying.

Starbucks shows how a purchase can become embedded in progress, payment, and routine.

Those are not three magical brain hacks. They are three ways of shaping the environment around ordinary choices.

And this is where the skeptical response is important: much of this is genuinely useful.

Personalization can save you from digging through irrelevant products. One-click ordering can spare you from typing the same address for the four-hundredth time. A loyalty program can give real rewards for purchases you were going to make anyway.

Convenience is not automatically manipulation.

The mistake is assuming that because a feature helps you, it cannot also help the company shape behavior.

Both things can be true.

A store can make shopping pleasant and increase the chance you notice something else. An app can save time and make purchasing easier to complete. A rewards program can give you value while making return visits more attractive.

Once you see that, resisting every influence is not the goal. You would have to shop in a featureless concrete room with exact cash and apparently grow your own toothpaste.

The practical move is to restore friction only where you personally need it.

If Target is where unplanned items keep multiplying, do not begin with “be more disciplined.” Begin with the pattern. What were you feeling? What section were you in? What were you originally there to buy? Which item changed the trip from planned shopping into browsing?

If Amazon is the problem, make reconsideration slightly more annoying than purchasing currently is. Move nonessential items to a wishlist. Delay them. Remove the shortcut that turns “interesting” into “ordered” before the thought has fully introduced itself.

If rewards pull you back toward purchases you would otherwise skip, treat progress as information, not an obligation. A nearly completed reward is not money you have already earned. The cheapest way to finish some loyalty goals is occasionally to leave them unfinished.

That may feel emotionally offensive to a progress bar. It will recover.

And pay attention to the sentence you use after an impulse purchase.

“I deserved it.”

“It was on sale.”

“I was already ordering something.”

“I only needed a few more Stars.”

Those sentences are useful because they often arrive after the trigger but before the regret. They are not evidence that you are irrational. They are clues about the situations where your decision-making becomes easiest to steer.

Which brings us back to the Target parking lot.

The toothpaste is still there. So is the candle, the charger, the snack, and the mysterious object that entered the cart under circumstances it has declined to discuss.

But the receipt means something different now.

It is not proof that Target hacked your brain.

It is a record of a decision environment.

Something became noticeable. Something felt relevant. The purchase became easy enough to complete, and in other settings, repetition may make the next decision easier still.

You still make the final choice.

The important part is realizing that the choice does not happen in empty space.

And once you know which environments, emotions, and little moments repeatedly change how you spend, you can stop treating every regretted purchase as a completely new mistake.

If you want a structured way to do that, the Spending Trigger Audit is designed to help you examine the situations, emotions, store or platform triggers, and recurring patterns behind unnecessary spending so you can see what keeps happening before the purchase, not just wonder where the money went afterward.

The link is in the video description and the pinned comment.

Because the goal is not to become impossible to influence.

It is to notice when convenience has quietly started making decisions easier than you want them to be.