

Study: Consumers distort information to support their preferences

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A new report co-authored by Margaret Meloy, assistant professor of marketing at Penn State's Smeal College of Business, finds that the order in which people receive information about two similar products has a strong influence on their evaluation of those products.

According to the report, which will appear in the March 2006 issue of the Journal of Consumer Research, consumers are very likely to positively support a product brand that first appears to show superiority in its category. Consumers may even choose an inferior product if the earliest information they receive about it is positive.

The research shows how information order can be used to create a tentative preference for one product over another. Once a leading option emerges, consumers build support for it by biasing their interpretation of new information to favor it. The consequence of this process is that it is possible to dictate which brand consumers ultimately select by merely changing the order of the information.

The researchers examined what they termed leader-driven primacy in three separate studies, using backpacks, winter coats, and restaurants as test products. In one study, two options were intentionally made to be equivalent overall. In another, one choice was markedly superior. In both of these studies, the researchers were able to influence which brand was favored by changing the order in which the information was presented.

This is the first paper to show that information order can be used to

influence choice in such a way.

In the third study, the researchers explored a method to reduce this effect. They had subjects focus more on the whole brand than on the individual features of each brand. They found that these particular subjects were more objective and influenced less by early positive information about a particular brand.

Joining Meloy as co-authors on the study, *Leader-Driven Primacy: Using Attribute Order to Affect Consumer Choice*, are Kurt A. Carlson of Duke University and J. Edward Russo of Cornell University.

Source: Penn State University

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