The 'best ever' marketing strategy? Maybe not, study says

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Marketing is often filled with hype and superlatives—the greatest, the best and even “heavenly”—but a new University of Georgia study that uncovers a curious aspect of human psychology could change how companies pitch their products.

In a study published in the March issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, a team led by UGA Terry College of Business assistant professor Vanessa Patrick finds that people take notice when they feel worse than they thought they would, but—oddly—not when they feel better than expected. The message for marketers, Patrick said, is that too much hype can hurt a company when people realize that their expectations haven’t been met.

“A number of marketers hype their product by using words like, ‘best ever’ or ‘the ultimate experience,’ to get customers to buy,” Patrick said. “But you don’t survive with a customer buying something once—satisfaction, repeat purchases and positive word of mouth are very important. Our study suggests that too much hype can be detrimental.”

People make predictions about how they’ll feel in the future all the time, but several studies have found that we often predict wrong. Patrick and co-authors Debbie MacInnis and C. Whan Park at the University of Southern California have coined the term “affective misforecasting” to describe the gap between anticipated feelings and actual feelings. To explore the role this misforecasting plays in product evaluations, the researchers recruited 171 volunteers to evaluate two different products, a film clip and a music clip.

In the first study, the researchers told the volunteers that they were about to see a movie and gave them ratings of the movie similar to what they would read on Amazon.com. About half the participants read positive reviews of the movie and were told that the average review was five stars. The other half read negative reviews of the movie and were told the movie had a one-star rating. Both groups watched the same film clip, a black and white silent comedy that had been shown in previous research to generate a relatively neutral response.

The researchers found that participants who anticipated watching a one-star movie but saw a somewhat funny movie did not pay attention to the fact that they felt better than anticipated. When participants read about a five-star movie but saw the old black and white movie, on the other hand, the difference was reflected in their evaluation of the movie.

In the second study, the researchers used a music clip and added a twist: After the participants either read the one-star or five-star review, some participants were given the additional task of remembering a seven-digit number. (The idea, unknown to the volunteers, was to prevent them from thinking about the gap in their anticipated and actual feelings.) The group that did not have to remember the number had similar results to those in the first part of the study. But in those who had to remember the number—and were distracted from thinking about their feelings—didn't note the gap between their expected and actual feeling in their evaluation.

"Affective misforecasting really has to do with emotions and not with product performance," Patrick said. "Curiously, however, when consumers don't feel as good as they expect to feel, this gap in feelings influences how they evaluate the product."

In addition to highlighting the pitfalls of too much hype, Patrick said her study also implies that businesses can help themselves by helping consumers take notice of when they feel better than expected. Some grocery stores, for example, print messages on their receipts telling consumers how much they've saved. Patrick said the benefits of accentuating the positive may also apply to changing attitudes about doing necessary but sometimes unpleasant things like going to the dentist or the doctor's office for a health screening.

For consumers, affective misforecasting may explain why that new jacket you "just had to have" is now relegated to the back of your closet, unlikely to be ever worn again. It may also explain why people agree to make presentations, speeches and other commitments, but kick themselves for agreeing when the time comes to do it. It may even help explain why one in two marriages ends in divorce.

Patrick said that misforecasting can be minimized simply by creating a more realistic expectation of the future. People may think about how much fun coaching the local youth soccer team will be, but neglect to think about other commitments they'll have at the same time. People imagine themselves in a flashy new pair of shoes, but often neglect to think about the shoes in context of the rest of their wardrobe. Both mistakes could be avoided simply by putting the commitment or the product in context, Patrick said.

"When we think about the future we tend to think about it through this zoom lens that focuses on the event or the product and how nice it's going to be," Patrick said. "But context is important. The future is no different than the present."

Source: University of Georgia