

Unusual brand logos and images work well

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The world of branding is full of iconic characters, images and logos that help hawk a company's wares, but those that seem to have little in common with its product may be the most effective, says a University of Michigan researcher.

"Among marketers, there has been a trend to employ unusual visual identifiers that have little, if anything, to do with the product," said Norbert Schwarz, a professor of marketing at Michigan's Ross School of Business. "An advantage for marketers of including distinct visual identifiers in the design of their logo or label is that such features help garner consumer attention. Also, over time, many of these symbols become part of a brand's equity."

In a forthcoming article in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, Schwarz and colleagues Aparna Labroo of the University of Chicago and Ravi Dhar of Yale University conduct three studies that show consumers prefer a product with a visual identifier on its label or logo over those without one, provided the identifier is easy to process.

The researchers say the easier it is for consumers to process the perceptual, or physical, features of a product, including its visual identifiers, the more apt they are to like it. Further, these perceptual features can be semantically cued through priming, that is, the act of exposing a stimulus—in this case, a picture or some other visual identifier—enhances consumer preference for a product because of the ease of perceptual processing.

"Consider the case of a consumer with a young son who loves Kermit the Frog," said Schwarz, who is also a professor of psychology and research professor at the U-M Institute for Social Research. "She is buying a wine online and encounters a wine bottle that features a label with the image of a frog.

"Neither Kermit nor other frogs have much to do with wine, but the increased exposure to Kermit may facilitate the visual processing of a label that features a frog and increase its aesthetic appeal. This increased appeal of the label, in turn, may increase the consumer's preference for the 'frog wine' over a wine that features a different label."

While prior research has shown that semantic primes (exposure to concepts) can facilitate the processing of conceptually related visual stimuli, the study by Schwarz and colleagues is the first to explore arbitrary unrelated visual identifiers, such as a frog or other critter on a wine bottle label or an animal insignia on designer clothing.

Unique arbitrary identifiers—distinct logos, packaging or some other mnemonic technique—can have an important advantage over identifiers that are meaningfully related to the type of product (e.g., grapes on a wine label): They are not shared by competitors.

"Over time, the association of unique identifiers with a brand facilitates development of that particular brand's equity, whereas the association of meaningful identifiers runs the risk of contributing to brand dilution as they may be readily applied to competing brands in the category," Schwarz said. "This suggestion is radically different from traditional branding strategies.

"Whereas common branding wisdom suggests that identifiers should be strongly associated with the product category, our findings suggest that it may be beneficial to choose visual identifiers that consumers strongly

associate with themselves. Of course, even arbitrary visual identifiers may eventually become associated with the category to which the target brand belongs."

Source: University of Michigan

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