

Not buying it: Marketing messages may not work in uncommon situations

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Marketers like to talk about "priming" goals -- or sending subtle messages to encourage consumption. For example, thirsty people who encounter ads related to thirst tend to buy more beverages.

But a surprising new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* reveals that goal priming can backfire, especially when consumers are in uncommon situations.

Authors Juliano Laran (University of Miami), Chris Janiszewski (University of Florida, Gainesville), and Marcus Cunha, Jr. (University of Washington, Seattle) examined the phenomenon called "goal priming," and its opposite: "anti-priming."

"A priming effect occurs when active information influences people's behavior," explain the authors. "For example, a consumer exposed to information related to impressing others (e.g., a brand slogan containing the word "excellence") may become more likely to buy expensive products that are symbols of status. Anti-priming effects occur when the use of goal primes backfire and lead to the opposite effects of those intended by the priming cues."

During the course of the study, the researchers stimulated goals in undergraduate participants by having them unscramble sentences. Some of the sentences related to having fun, some to impressing others, and some had neutral sentences. After their goals were primed, participants chose restaurants—although they did not know the tasks were related.

When participants were planning a dinner for that night (a common situation), they chose restaurants consistent with the primed goals. In a less common situation (choosing a restaurant for a dinner a month from now), people who were primed for fun or impressing others were less likely to choose a corresponding restaurant. Subsequent studies yielded similar results: In familiar situations, priming goals worked; in uncommon ones, the goal priming backfired.

The authors believe that marketers should be aware of the effects of priming and anti-priming. "The implication of these findings is that retailers should understand the amount of experience consumers have with certain choice situations before using priming as a marketing tool to influence consumers," they conclude.

Source: University of Chicago

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