

Doubts make consumers more willing to reevaluate brands, study finds

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Most consumers crave a clear understanding of brand images, making them more receptive to new marketing messages if anything clouds their vision of companies or products, according to a new study by a University of Illinois marketing expert.

Sharon Shavitt says the findings are good news for companies seeking to retool the image of seemingly ingrained brands, such as McDonald's efforts to promote salads and other healthful menu options.

"The message is that people don't just form brand opinions and stick with them," said Shavitt, a professor of business administration.

"Instead, they're constantly monitoring their sense of understanding. They may in fact be swinging between doubt and closure more often than we think."

The study, which will appear in the *Journal of Marketing Research* in April, examined how consumers internally manage brand understanding and how a sense of difficulty when thinking about brands influences their impressions.

Consumers forced to consider brands while feeling a sense of effort - such as reading blurry print, facing time constraints or furrowing their brow - were more open to new marketing messages than those who didn't face those challenges, the study found.

And the sense of effort ultimately led those consumers to a more

favorable view of the brand, according to the study, co-written by Kansas State University marketing professor Kyoungmi Lee, a U. of I. doctoral student when the research began.

"A sense of difficulty threatens consumers' metacognitive comfort zone and can lead them to doubt their understanding of an established brand," Shavitt said. "Consumers expect a strong sense of understanding for those brands, and when that's threatened it can lead them to be more open to reevaluating a brand."

She says consumers regularly confront situations in everyday life that can pose similar challenges to brand understanding, such as distractions while listening to commercials or reading advertisements.

"Anything that makes it hard to think can create a sense of difficulty that can extend to our perceived understanding of the brand," Shavitt said. "You could be listening to a radio ad in the car while horns are honking and you're watching street signs to make a turn."

Marketers also can plant a sense of struggle, she said, such as contests or online surveys with new information that runs counter to a brand's traditional image. McDonald's, one of the brands included in the study, could instill doubt by asking consumers how many salad varieties are on menus or the sodium content of its burgers and fries, she said.

"I think you can lead people to doubt their sense of understanding and in so doing be more open to the ideas you want them to embrace," Shavitt said. "So I think McDonald's can reinvent itself, as can other brands. And this shows it might not be as difficult as once thought."

She says some findings may appear surprising, such as consumers adopting a more favorable view of brands despite confronting seemingly negative experiences such as furrowed brows and blurry print.

"That's news because I think people would otherwise assume that those experiences would lead to a less favorable view of the brand," Shavitt said. "We're saying not at all - it depends on what new information they seize on after the experience leads them to rethink the brand."

The study also found that consumers with the greatest need for closure, based on personality evaluations, were most likely to reevaluate brands after facing difficulties while thinking about them, she said.

"Ahead of time, you probably would predict that people with a strong need for closure would be the most closed-minded. That's not at all what we found. When we induced doubt, those people really wanted to eliminate doubt and were most likely to change their views."

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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