

# Learning from our mistakes: Consumers won't be deceived twice

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Sometimes a high price tag, a label, or an ingredient can lead us to believe that we're purchasing a high-quality item. But what happens if the attribute that attracted us to the product is false or meaningless? A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* examines consumer responses to "biasing cues," features that consumers assume are related to the quality of the item.

"Often consumers' beliefs about the relationship between an attribute and product quality are correct," write authors Wouter Vanhouche (University of Central Florida, Orlando) and Stijn van Osselaer (Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University). "For example, higher-priced products are often better quality products. However, in many other cases, those beliefs are incorrect. For example, many low-priced products are actually quite good and many high-priced products are actually quite bad. Some attributes are even just irrelevant to product quality or are completely meaningless. For example, putting silk in shampoo does not do anything for hair but consumers may nevertheless expect it to."

Past research has demonstrated that biasing cues can successfully deceive consumers into buying items. But the authors wanted to find out if the same consumers would be deceived a second time. Using laboratory experiments involving orange juice, polo shirts, and paper towels, the authors found that biased quality expectations did not carry over to a second purchase. In fact, participants learned from those initial judgment mistakes.

"We found that consumers' quality judgments were actually made more accurate by the presence of such attributes," write the authors. "The presence of a high price on a low-quality orange juice or a Florida (vs. New Jersey) bottling location on a low-quality juice did not make the consumers more positive about the product one week after trying the product, but helped them to remember that the high-priced or the Florida-bottled juice was bad," the authors explain.

The message to marketers is that consumers are not so easily duped. "Marketers should think twice about trying to mislead consumers by putting high prices on low-quality products or by touting attributes that seem to signal quality but in reality are meaningless," write the authors. "Marketers using such attributes may succeed at getting consumers to try their products, but the misleading actions are likely to backfire at the time of repeat purchase."

More information: Wouter Vanhouche and Stijn van Osselaer. "The Accuracy Enhancing Effect of Biasing Cues." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2009.

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