

Guided by expectations: Different approaches lead to different conclusions

March 31 2009

Consumers often make decisions by predicting how they'll feel after an event or purchase. But different approaches to predicting lead to different conclusions, according to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Authors Jane E. J. Ebert (University of Minnesota), Daniel T. Gilbert (Harvard University), and Timothy D. Wilson (University of Virginia) examined the difference between two common ways of predicting emotions: forecasting and "backcasting."

According to the authors, forecasters imagine how they'll feel when an event occurs and then consider how they'll feel subsequent to the event. In contrast, backcasters imagine their feelings in a future period and then consider the effects of an event. As an example, the authors give an example of a potential ad for a cruise. An ad that encouraged backcasting could read as follows: "How are you going to be feeling in frigid February? Imagine you take a sun-filled Caribbean cruise next week. Now imagine how you will feel in February. Help yourself through the winter...book a cruise today."

The authors conducted several studies where they examined the thoughts of forecasters and backcasters and systematically varied the information available to participants. They discovered that when predicting their feelings for events, backcasters considered information about the event and the future time period more than the forecasters did. As a result, backcasters predicted more extreme feelings than forecasters did.

Therefore, it would be beneficial for marketers to encourage backcasting in [consumers](#).

"These differences in the information that backcasters and forecasters consider and in the predictions they make suggest that simply changing the order in which consumers think about a potential [consumption](#) event and an upcoming future time period can markedly change their expectations about their feelings following the event," the researchers explain.

"Marketers should be able to change consumers' expectations about their feelings simply by prompting them to think ahead to the future before considering a consumption event," the authors conclude.

More information: Jane E. J. Ebert, Daniel T. Gilbert, and Timothy D. Wilson. "Forecasting and Backcasting: Predicting the Impact of Events on the Future." [Journal of Consumer Research](#): October 2009.

Source: University of Chicago ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Guided by expectations: Different approaches lead to different conclusions (2009, March 31) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-03-approaches-conclusions.html>

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