

Taking cues: Sometimes environmental cues can activate thrifty behavior

March 31 2009

Consumers are constantly bombarded with subtle and even subconscious cues from their environment. A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* examines whether these cues activate goals that affect behavior in the long term or momentary desires that fade away.

Authors Aner Sela and Baba Shiv (both Stanford Graduate School of Business) investigated the difference between goals that influence behavior and semantic activation, which has no lingering effect on behavior.

"Passing mindlessly by a discount store on the way to the mall might activate the goal of being frugal, which can sustain for a relatively long duration and influence subsequent purchases at the mall," explain the authors. "Alternatively, the same discount store may simply bring to mind the semantic notion of frugality, without actually activating the lingering motivation to behave frugally."

The difference between the two outcomes, the authors believe, depends on the degree to which the primed concept (like frugality) is perceived as discrepant from the consumer's self-concept. In other words, a person who does not see himself as frugal who is exposed to a prime is more likely to activate a goal of frugality and to pursue that goal until he feels he has fulfilled it. But someone who already believes she is frugal is more likely to respond to the prime in a short-term fashion.

In the experiments, the authors asked a large group of university students

to rate the extent to which they saw themselves as physically fit. Then the authors exposed the participants to quick flashes of words related to physical fitness (primes) without participants being aware of the exposure. Finally the participants were asked to select and drink one of two energy [beverages](#): They were told one boosted mental acuity and the other boosted fitness.

"Participants who had rated themselves as unfit to begin with were more likely than people in a control group to select the fitness drink after a long delay, which suggests that nonconscious exposure to the fitness words activated a fitness goal among those people," write the authors. "In contrast, participants who had rated themselves as fit to begin with were more likely than people in a control group to select the fitness drink immediately after exposure to the fitness words, but this effect faded out quickly."

More information: Aner Sela and Baba Shiv. "Unraveling Priming: When Does the Same Prime Goal Activate a Goal versus a Trait?" [Journal of Consumer Research](#): October 2009.

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

Citation: Taking cues: Sometimes environmental cues can activate thrifty behavior (2009, March 31) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-03-cues-environmental-thrifty-behavior.html>

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