

To be or to become: That's the question for advertisers

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If you won a million dollars today, what would you do? Say "sayonara" to your boss and head to Bora Bora, or invest your newfound wealth in a long-term T-bill?

According to new research by Dr. Danit Ein-Gar of Tel Aviv University's Recanati Graduate School of Business Studies, your answer may not be so clear-cut. She and her American colleague Dr. Camille Su Lin Johnson found that whether you'll indulge or be prudent is not necessarily based on your personality type or education, but may be strongly influenced by advertising and other environmental cues.

This research, the first to quantify the effect of advertising on personal desires using these parameters, was recently presented at the Academy of Consumer Research Conference in Pittsburgh.

"Being" versus "becoming"

In their studies of about 500 participants, the researchers divided consumers into two mindsets. The "being" mindset was related to one's current state in life, while the "becoming" mindset reflected a desire to think of one's future goals. The researchers showed volunteers an advertisement that induces a "being" state of mind, using a simple slogan like, "Think of who you are right now."

Advertisements with this approach were successful in attracting

consumers to products like chocolate. But those volunteers who read future-oriented ads using a simple slogan like, "Think of who you will become in the future," before embarking on a grocery run, were more likely to choose healthy products, such as fruits and granola bars.

In another study, the subjects were told they had won \$1,000. Those identified as having a "becoming" mindset elected to buy practical products such as textbooks with the money, while those in the "being" mindset said they'd purchase indulgent products such as a [plasma TV](#).

"Sometimes we are goal-driven and sometimes we are self-indulgent," Dr. Ein-Gar says of her conclusions. "But we've established that simple advertising cues can shift your mindset from one category to the other. It can determine how you shop in the supermarket, choose a snack, evaluate a new car or invest your family's fortune."

To be most effective, Dr. Ein-Gar says advertisers should determine if their product is "now" or "future" oriented, then position it to fit that mindset. For chocolate, red sports cars or Club Med hedonism vacations, advertisers should appeal to a "being" mindset and suggest immediate gratification. However, products with future benefits like gym memberships, mutual funds or health foods should appeal to the "becoming" mindset, using ads that trigger one's desire for a brighter future.

Dangers and benefits

The study found it is also easy — over the long term and with frequent repetition — for advertisers to shift a mindset radically. Companies can benefit from playing up the difference between a person's current self and who they'd like to become, so consumers should be aware it's not that hard to have their preferences manipulated. That's where advertising is most powerful.

"Manipulating people to maintain an ongoing state of mind is hard to do successfully, but manipulating them into a temporal mindset is easier. Using this approach, companies can be very successful in manipulating you to buy their products, especially in cases where the purchase decision is made spontaneously, like grabbing a snack at the store. Also beware: companies can influence your mindset and affect your pocket book if you're not careful," Dr. Ein-Gar warns.

Conversely, researchers were also able to show that [advertising](#) can benefit consumers, especially when it promotes healthy eating or wiser decisions about money. "The U.S. Army used the 'Be All You Can Be' slogan for more than 20 years," Dr. Ein-Gar reminds us. "It induced a 'becoming' [mindset](#) that encouraged young people to think of long-range goals as they considered a career in the military."

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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