

Don't understand what the product is? Ask a woman

January 18 2011

A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* shows that women are better than men at figuring out unusual products when they're among competing items.

"A lot of times when we look at how consumers respond to innovative change in a product's physical form, we fail to consider that the context where they see the product plays a major role in how they evaluate and interpret it," write authors Theodore J. Noseworthy, June Cotte, and Seung Hwan (Mark) Lee (all University of Western Ontario).

The researchers examined consumer reactions to innovative [products](#), like a car without visible wheels or a soft drink packaged in a strange way. In their experiments, some participants viewed advertisements for normal-looking products, whereas others saw extremely unusual products. Sometimes the ads for the unusual items were alongside similar products and other times they were alongside completely unrelated products.

"Our results show that women are better than men at figuring out an extremely unusual product, as long as the product is promoted among competing products," the authors write. For example, female participants understood that a car without visible wheels was a car if the ad appeared in a magazine with other car ads, while men had trouble.

Perhaps not surprisingly, once the women figured out what the products were, they liked them more. But here's the catch: When women used the

other ads to identify the unusual products, they had trouble accurately remembering the claims within the ads. "Women, as compared to men, are more likely to mix in claims from ads for competing products when they are using those products to make sense of an unusual product," the authors write. This confusion only happened with the female participants.

"There are dramatic differences in how males and females process the [advertising](#) context," the authors write. "Consumers—female [consumers](#) in particular—may be able to understand greater levels of visual incongruity than traditionally thought. For example, women in a cell-phone store should be better able to use store context to understand a radical new cell phone than would men in an electronics store."

More information: Theodore J. Noseworthy, June Cotte, and Seung Hwan (Mark) Lee. "The Effects of Ad Context and Gender on the Identification of Visually Incongruent Products." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2011. Further information: ejcr.org

Provided by University of Chicago

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