

When the pressure is on, product experts can get facts wrong: study

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Buying a new car, camera or computer? New research from the Sauder School of Business at the University of British Columbia shows that seeking advice from expert acquaintances to choose between models of merchandise might not always be good idea.

Sauder marketing researcher JoAndrea Hoegg discovered that experts with specific product knowledge can make mistakes when relying on their memories to compare complex goods – especially when they feel compelled to explain how they arrive at their decisions.

“Ours results suggest that when experts use their memories to compare [products](#) with numerous features, such as cameras, cars and computers, they often falsely recall information and fill in gaps with prior knowledge,” says Asst. Prof. Hoegg, who co-wrote the paper for the Journal of Consumer Research with Sauder PhD student Ravi Mehta and New York University marketing professor Amitav Chakravarti.

The researchers found that when asked for help with purchase decisions, those deemed in the know feel obliged to provide detailed explanations about how they arrived at their recommendations. And that a feeling of accountability and pressure to give the best recommendations can lead to false recalls, according to the study.

“People who identify themselves as experts feel the need to compare brands across all of the available features,” explains Hoegg. “And when some of the features are not comparable, their extra effort leads them to

insert information from memory, which reduces the quality of their conclusions.”

The researchers conducted an experiment with 113 undergraduate students who were given lists of features for two fictitious brands of videogame consoles. Half of the features were directly comparable and half were not. For example, online gaming was listed for one brand and nothing about online gaming was indicated for the second.

Participants were allowed two minutes to study the lists of options for the video game consoles. They were then provided an unrelated questionnaire created to assess their level of videogame console expertise.

After a delay of 20 minutes, the subjects were given a test which required them to recall the lists of features which they had been provided for each console brand.

Finally, they were given a questionnaire designed to measure their feelings of accountability, asking them to rate their reactions to statements, such as, “I was concerned about the possibility of making a mistake.”

The results show that the participants who scored high on the questionnaire rating their level of expertise about videogame consoles also had the highest percentages of false recalls of product feature information.

They also demonstrated that the false recalls were being driven by the higher sense of responsibility felt by experts, as those who made a greater number of false recalls also reported the highest levels of accountability for their decisions.

Furthermore, in a similar experiment in the study, the researchers discovered that when experts are relieved of their sense of accountability and do not feel the need to provide detailed explanations about their judgments, they made fewer false recalls.

“If you’re turning to a product expert for advice,” says Hoegg, “it’s important that they have access to all of the information they need to make their decisions, and that you let them know that it won’t be the end of the world if they make a mistake.”

Provided by University of British Columbia

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