

Seeing brands as people

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From the Michelin Man to the Pillsbury Doughboy, anthropomorphized brands have often been used by companies eager to put a personal face on their products. Now new research shows that thinking about brands as people can make you either take on the brand's characteristics or display the opposite characteristics, depending on how you feel about the brand.

Pankaj Aggarwal, a professor in the Department of Management at the University of Toronto Scarborough (UTSC) untangled some of the complexities in an upcoming paper in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#).

Aggarwal, along with Ann L. McGill of the University of Chicago, looked at an effect called behavioral priming. Previous research has shown that you can affect people's behavior by reminding them about a [social group](#). For instance, if you talk to [people](#) about the elderly, those who feel positively about the elderly will unconsciously mimic them by walking more slowly; people with [negative feelings](#) about the elderly will walk more quickly. Without realizing it people are trying to either show social affinity to the elderly or reject them.

Other research has shown that the same behavior happens with brands, even when they don't have a human-like mascot like the Doughboy. In one previous experiment, participants exposed to the Apple brand behaved more creatively, and those exposed to the Disney brand behaved more honestly than others. The brands were exerting a "quasi-social" influence.

But Aggarwal and McGill found that it's not as simple as merely liking or disliking a brand. In a series of experiments they confirmed the social priming effect, but also showed that the social role that the brand represented also had an effect on behavior. Specifically, they looked at the difference between a brand that was perceived as a "partner," and one that was perceived as a "servant."

For instance, in one part of the experiment the researchers used questions about the Volvo automobile, which is perceived as extremely safe. They manipulated whether participants saw the Volvo as a partner ("Volvo. Works With You. Helping You Take Care of What's Important.") or a servant ("Volvo. Works For You Taking Care of What's Important.") Participants were asked to think of the brand as a person, and then were asked questions about what risks they would take in a gambling situation, and finally how likeable they found the Volvo brand.

People who saw the [brand](#) as a partner and liked it said they would take fewer risks; people who saw it as a partner and disliked it said they would take more risks. The opposite was true when the Volvo was seen as a servant: those who liked it said they would take more risks, and those who disliked it said they would take fewer risks.

What was going on? Aggarwal and McGill explain that the two different roles, partner and servant, elicit different goals. In partners we like we want to show our affinity by behaving like them. In partners we dislike we want to drive them away by behaving differently. With servants we like, however, we want to show that we need them -- in the case of Volvo, participants showed they were careless and needed Volvo to perform the role of safety provider. People who disliked Volvo behaved carefully, to show they didn't need Volvo's services.

No one had these thoughts consciously, Aggarwal says. Rather they were

the effect of automatic social behaviors which participants unthinkingly applied to brands once they started to imagine them as people.

"Prof. Aggarwal's research explores how cognitive mechanisms that evolved in humanity's distant past interact with our 21st Century world, often in surprising ways. His research promises to help us understand how and why we behave the way we do in our modern consumer culture," says Malcolm Campbell, UTSC vice-principal, research.

The next step, Aggarwal says, is to explore other roles that brands can take on and see how those affect our willingness to take on their characteristics.

Provided by University of Toronto Scarborough

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