

The advantages of being first

July 2 2012

How people make choices depends on many factors, but a new study finds people consistently prefer the options that come first: first in line, first college to offer acceptance, first salad on the menu – first is considered best.

The paper, "First is Best," recently published in *PLoS ONE* by Dana R. Carney, assistant professor of management, University of California, Berkeley's Haas School of Business, and co-author Mahzarin R. Banaji, professor of psychology, Harvard University.

In three experiments, when making quick choices, participants consistently preferred people (salespersons, teams, criminals on parole) or consumer goods presented first as opposed to similar offerings in second and sequential positions. The authors say their findings may have practical applications in a variety of settings including in consumer marketing.

"The order of individuals performing on talent shows like American Idol. The order of potential companies recommended by a stockbroker. The order of college acceptance letters received by an applicant. All of these firsts have privileged status," says Carney. "Our research shows that managers, for example in management or marketing, may want to develop their business strategies knowing that first encounters are preferable to their clients or consumers."

The study found that especially in circumstances under which decisions must be made quickly or without much deliberation, preferences are

unconsciously and immediately guided to those options presented first. While there are sometimes rational reasons to prefer firsts, e.g. the first resume is designated on the top of the pile because that person wanted the job the most, Carney says the "first is best" effect suggests that firsts are preferred even when completely unwarranted and irrational.

The study's first experiment asked 123 participants to evaluate three groups: (a) two teams, (b) two male salespersons, and (c) two female salespersons. First, participants were asked to join one of the two teams and were introduced to the Hadleys and the Rodsons. Immediately following the introduction, they decided which team to join. Next, participants were told they were buying a car and introduced to two male salespersons: Jim and Jon. Immediately following the introduction, they selected the salesperson from whom they preferred to buy a car. Finally, participants were told they needed to re-make their car-buying decision and that they would be introduced to two new salespersons; this time, female: Lisa and Lori. After sequential introduction they, again, decided which person they'd like to buy a car from.

When asking participants about their choices, the researchers asked about choice in two ways: conscious/deliberate choice, which was self-reported (i.e., "I prefer Lisa to Lori"), or they completed a reaction-time task adapted from cognitive psychology in which participants' automatic, unconscious preference for each option was assessed (i.e. "good," "better," "superior"). Regardless of whom people said they preferred, on the unconscious, cognitive measure of preference, participants always preferred the first team or person to whom they were introduced.

To test the choice preferences of consumer goods, the researchers asked 207 passengers at a train station to select one of two pieces of similar bubble gum in a "rapid decision task" or choosing within a second of seeing the choices (using psychologist Daniel Kahneman's theory on 'thinking, fast and slow'). Once again, the result was the same: when

thinking fast, the bubble gum presented first was the preferable [choice](#) in most cases.

Researchers considered the salespeople and the gum relatively positive stimuli, without controversy. In order to test their theory with negatively charged options, Carney and Banaji asked another group of 31 participants to choose between pairs of convicted criminals and decide which one was more worthy of parole instead of prison. After viewing mug shots of two 29 year-old criminals known to have committed the same violent crimes with similar features and facial expressions, again, when "thinking fast," participants judged the first criminal presented as more worthy of parole.

If order matters, why? Carney contends the proven "primacy has power" theory may provide the best answers. The paper cites, "a preference for firsts has its origins in an evolutionary adaptation favoring firsts ..." For example, in most cases, humans tend to innately prefer the first people they meet: a mother, family members. In addition, those preferences are associated with what's safe. Carney says the historic concept of the established "pecking order" also supports their findings that people find "first is best."

More information: www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0035088

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

Citation: The advantages of being first (2012, July 2) retrieved 18 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-07-advantages.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.