

Motivating women to forget the message: When do breast cancer ads backfire?

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After a traumatic experience, the details we remember surrounding the event are sometimes foggy. According to a new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, consumers remember the least when they feel the most threatened.

"We are looking to identify the factors that contribute to [memory impairment](#)," write authors Amy N. Dalton (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology) and Li Huang (University of South Carolina). "In response to threats against their [social identity](#), people will try to preserve or protect the group they identify with."

One mental strategy threatened people use is what the authors term "motivated forgetting." In other words, to cope with trauma, the [human brain](#) fails to remember details associated with the event. The authors explain that motivated forgetting often occurs when people feel threatened about their gender, race, or ethnic group.

Consider an advertisement for breast cancer prevention. If the ad focuses on a woman's vulnerability to the disease, she may feel more vulnerable to the disease and not remember the prevention message at all.

Across four studies and testing a number of variables, the researchers examined how (and if) negative memories are encoded in short- and long-term memory. Their findings show that people are less likely to remember an advertisement if they feel threatened at the same time. For

example, students who read a newspaper article about how their university is underperforming were less likely to remember an ad offering a discount at the campus bookstore than students who read an unrelated (non-threatening) article.

Consider a special promotion offered to fans of a local sports team at a sports bar. If the team is having a bad season, dedicated fans may forget about the promotion and take their business elsewhere.

"Social-identity linked marketing is common nowadays and most work on the topic has examined factors like product or brand preference, but not memory. Because memory drives most consumer decisions, our research can help brands identify which factors can cause impairment," the authors conclude.

More information: Amy N. Dalton and Li Huang. "Motivated Forgetting in Response to Social Identity Threat." *Journal of Consumer Research*: April 2014.

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