

A phonetic key to prosociality and engagement

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(Phys.org) —People are more likely to help someone whose name ends with the "hard e" (/ē/) sound; women, in particular, prefer /ē/ sounds; and children's behavioral patterns seem to indicate that asking "Mommy?" for help gets better results than "Mom" or "Mother."

This according to Cornell-led studies ("Sounds That Make You Smile And Share: A Phonetic Key To Prosociality And Engagement") published this month in the journal, *Marketing Letters*. It all starts with the so-called forced smile effect and might lead to better business ideas for marketing and branding.

"When people physically make the EEE [sound](#), they're forced to smile – try it, you'll see," says Cornell's Kevin M. Kniffin, postdoctoral research associate in the Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management. "Forced smiling is effective at increasing mood."

Kniffin and his co-author, psychologist Mitsuru Shimizu from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (and recently a postdoc at Cornell) weren't the first to figure out the forced smiling phenomenon, an example of what social scientists call embodied cognition. But their three new studies – conducted with independent samples of undergraduate business students who got extra credit for participating – are said to advance social sciences' understanding of interpersonal interactions (and marketing campaigns that focus on consumer engagement).

The first study presented volunteers with three unfamiliar, gender-

neutral names (spelled Akami, Tomi and Ramsi) and pronounced, alternately and in random order, with the hard e and an "eye" sound (AKAM-EEE or AKAM-EYE, TO-MEEE or TO-MEYE, RAMS-EEE or RAMS-EYE) before asking some questions: How much do you like this name? How much do you think your best friend would like this name? How likely would you be to help someone with this name?

EEE-ending names were preferred by most, with one dissenter saying, "When I was younger maybe, but now that I am older it just seems like a kid's name."

Another group of volunteers was asked whether they preferred hard e vowel sounds over non-EEE sounds in words like food, hit, test, ban, put, hate, home, caught, dusk and cot.

Again, the EEEs prevailed but, interestingly, only for women's ratings. The authors point to previous research showing that women's names tend to disproportionately end in the EEE sound and speculate that baby talk or "motherese" might have relevance for the findings.

Speaking of which, then came the Mom-Mommy and Dad-Daddy test: "When you were a young child and you needed to ask your mother for help or a favor, how often did you call her Mom or Mommy?" was followed by a similar setup for fatherly favors. This time, college-age women were more likely to recall soliciting favors from Mommy or Daddy, whereas men recalled using both variations. "It is clear that women – and not men – recall using the /ē/ sound (Mommy and Daddy) address much more frequently," the researchers report.

For parents of children who still ask for favors and have always been suspicious when they are called Mommy or Daddy, the new article sheds light on some of the relevant background mechanisms. For companies wondering whether to name their drug Peginterferon or Plegridy, Kniffin

and Shimizu have this advice: "Our findings should help inform firm-level strategic questions regarding brand names and their relative likelihood to engage questions."

More information: "Sounds that make you smile and share: a phonetic key to prosociality and engagement." *Marketing Letters*, November 2014. link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11002-014-9328-8

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