

Consumers prefer round numbers even when the specific number is better news

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Consider this scenario: A vaccine for the novel coronavirus has been developed that is 91.27% effective. If public health officials present this information using the specific number, people are likely to think the

vaccine is actually less effective than if it is presented as being 90% effective.

This concept is a real-life application of recent findings from Gaurav Jain, an assistant professor of marketing in the Lally School of Management at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, published recently in *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Process*.

The paper, titled "Revisiting Attribute Framing: The Impact of Number Roundedness on Framing," explores an area of behavioral economics research pertaining to attribute framing, which evaluates how people make decisions based on the manner in which information is presented.

Watch this video to learn more.

For decades, researchers in this field have been focused on the attributes, the adjectives, and other words that describe what is being measured. In this paper, Jain looked at the numbers that are used in the frames themselves.

Using six sets of data with more than 1,500 participants, Jain and his co-authors considered what would happen to peoples' perception of information when specific, or non-round, numbers were used instead of round numbers.

The research showed that people find non-round numbers unique and jarring. Jain and his team determined that people pause to think about the specific number due to its uniqueness. Because it isn't easy to comprehend, people tend to compare the non-round number to an easily understood ideal standard—like 100%. Then, because the specific [number](#) doesn't live up to the ideal, people perceive it negatively.

"Numbers have a language and give non-numerical perceptions," Jain

said. "When we use specific numbers, the evaluations decrease. There was no apparent reason for this kind of behavior, and this was incredibly surprising."

While Jain and his team explored this question using standard behavioral economic research scenarios and not a specific question, such as communications regarding a potential coronavirus vaccine, this research has direct and critical impact in marketing and [public health](#) messaging.

"The extensive use of attribute framing in marketing, [organizational behavior](#), and public policy communication and the robustness of the effects in experimental settings make it one of the most important and frequently studied phenomena in the field," Jain said. "Managers and [public health officials](#) should be careful when using non-round numbers, because the use of this approach in communication messages may decrease the subjective evaluations of the target on the associated attributes."

According to Jain, the paper also helps to add to the theoretical understanding of attribute framing. "Our studies lend support and offer an elaborated process account for the attention-association-based reasoning for framing effects in general, which adds to the scarce literature on processes underlying framing effects," Jain said.

More information: Gaurav Jain et al, Revisiting attribute framing: The impact of number roundedness on framing, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2020.04.006](#)

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