

What the heck is it? Consumers can be primed to understand hybrid products

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Hybrid products are ubiquitous in today's marketplace: phones with cameras, watch/cameras, MP3 players with GPS systems. How can consumers understand the functions and features of these new products? A new study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* discovered a technique for helping consumers make sense of the ever-changing product landscape.

According to authors Priyali Rajagopal (Southern Methodist University) and Robert E. Burnkrant (Ohio State University), consumers have trouble categorizing products when functions and features are merged. "A common problem associated with such hybrid products is what we term the 'single-category belief' problem, namely that consumers typically categorize such products into a single pre-existing category (rather than creating new categories for them) and hold beliefs about the products that are consistent only with the category that is selected," the authors write.

For example, consumers might tend to categorize a new Casio product that functions as both a watch and a camera as a watch, making the marketing of that product difficult for marketers.

In the course of the study, the authors discovered ways to prepare consumers to categorize hybrid products. They used cues called "property primes," examples of products that blend features from two different categories, like a "pencil pen." Exposure to property primes increased participants' awareness of product features from outside the initial category, the authors found.

"For example, in one of our studies, respondents were more likely to rate a GPS-radar detector hybrid product as possessing features of both the GPS and radar detector categories when they were exposed to property primes," write the authors.

"Overall, our research provides support for an

approach that should help consumers evaluate hybrid products more carefully since it provides one way consumers can pay attention to and utilize attributes about all constituent categories of a hybrid product while making product evaluations," the authors conclude.

More information: Priyali Rajagopal and Robert E. Burnkrant. "Consumer Evaluations of Hybrid Products." *Journal of Consumer Research*: August 2009.

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