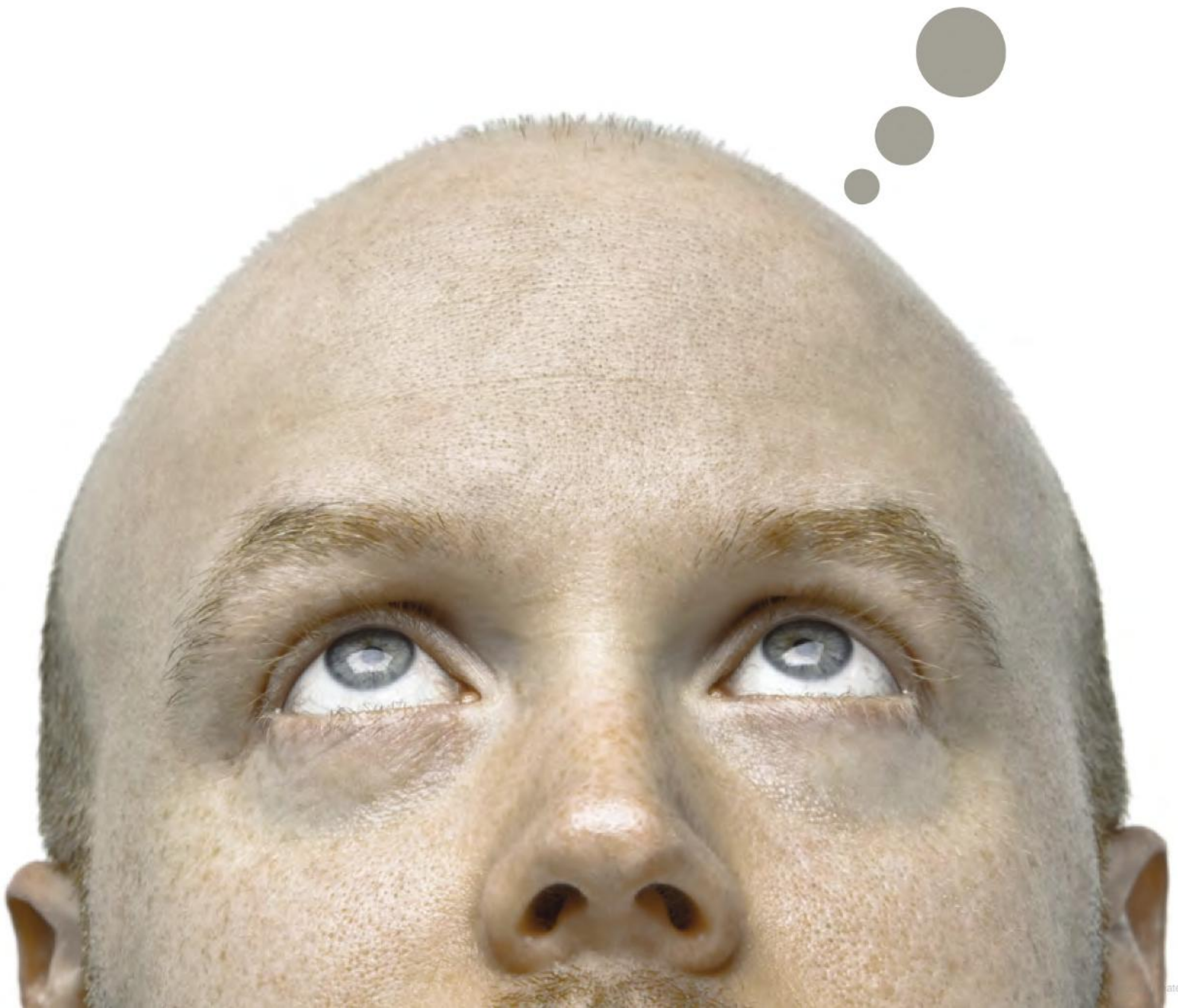


REVISED 3rd INTERNATIONAL EDITION

MAX SUTHERLAND
ADVERTISING
AND THE MIND OF
THE CONSUMER

What works, what doesn't, and why



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WHAT WORKS, WHAT DOESN’T, AND WHY

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1 INFLUENCING PEOPLE: MYTHS AND MECHANISMS

- Why do people buy bottled water that is available free from the tap?
- Why does advertising work on everybody else but not on us?
- Why do advertisers keep repeating an ad that we have already seen?

All these questions reflect the general belief that advertising works by persuading us, yet we don't feel personally that we are at all persuaded by it.

Why is it so difficult for us to introspect on advertising and how it influences us? Because we look for major effects, that's why! Too often, we look for the ability of a single ad to persuade us rather than for more subtle, minor effects. Big and immediate effects of advertising do occur when the advertiser has something new to say. Then it is easy for us to introspect on its effect.

But most effects of advertising fall well short of persuasion. These minor effects are not obvious but they are more characteristic of the way advertising works. To understand advertising we have to understand and measure these effects. When our kids are growing up we don't notice their physical growth each day but from time to time we become aware that they have grown. Determining how much a child has grown in the last 24 hours is like evaluating the effect of being exposed to a single commercial. In both cases, the changes are too small for us to notice. But even small effects of advertising can influence which brand we choose, especially when all other factors are equal and when alternative brands are much the same.

Weighing the alternatives: evaluation

It is easiest to understand this with low-involvement buying situations. The situation is like a 'beam balance' in which each brand weighs the same. With one brand on each side, the scale is balanced. However, it takes only

a feather added to one side of the balance to tip us in favor of the brand on that side. The brands consumers have to choose from are often very similar. Which one will the buying balance tip towards? When we look for advertising effects we are looking for feathers rather than heavy weights.¹

The buying of cars, appliances, vacations and other high-priced items are examples of high-involvement decision-making. This high level of involvement contrasts with the low level brought to bear on the purchase of products like shampoo or soft drink or margarine. For most of us, the buying of these smaller items is no big deal. We have better things to do with our time than agonize over which brand to choose every time we buy something.

The fact is that in many low-involvement product categories, the alternative brands are extremely similar and in some cases almost identical. Most consumers don't really care which one they buy and could substitute easily if their brand ceased to exist. It is in these low-involvement categories that the effects of advertising can be greatest and yet hardest to introspect upon.

Even with high-involvement products the beam balance analogy is relevant because very different alternatives can have equal weight. We often have to weigh up complex things like 'average quality at a moderate price' against 'premium quality at a higher price'. Often we find ourselves in a state of indecision between the alternatives. When the choices weigh equally in our mind, whether they be low-involvement products or high-involvement products, it can take just a feather to swing that balance.²

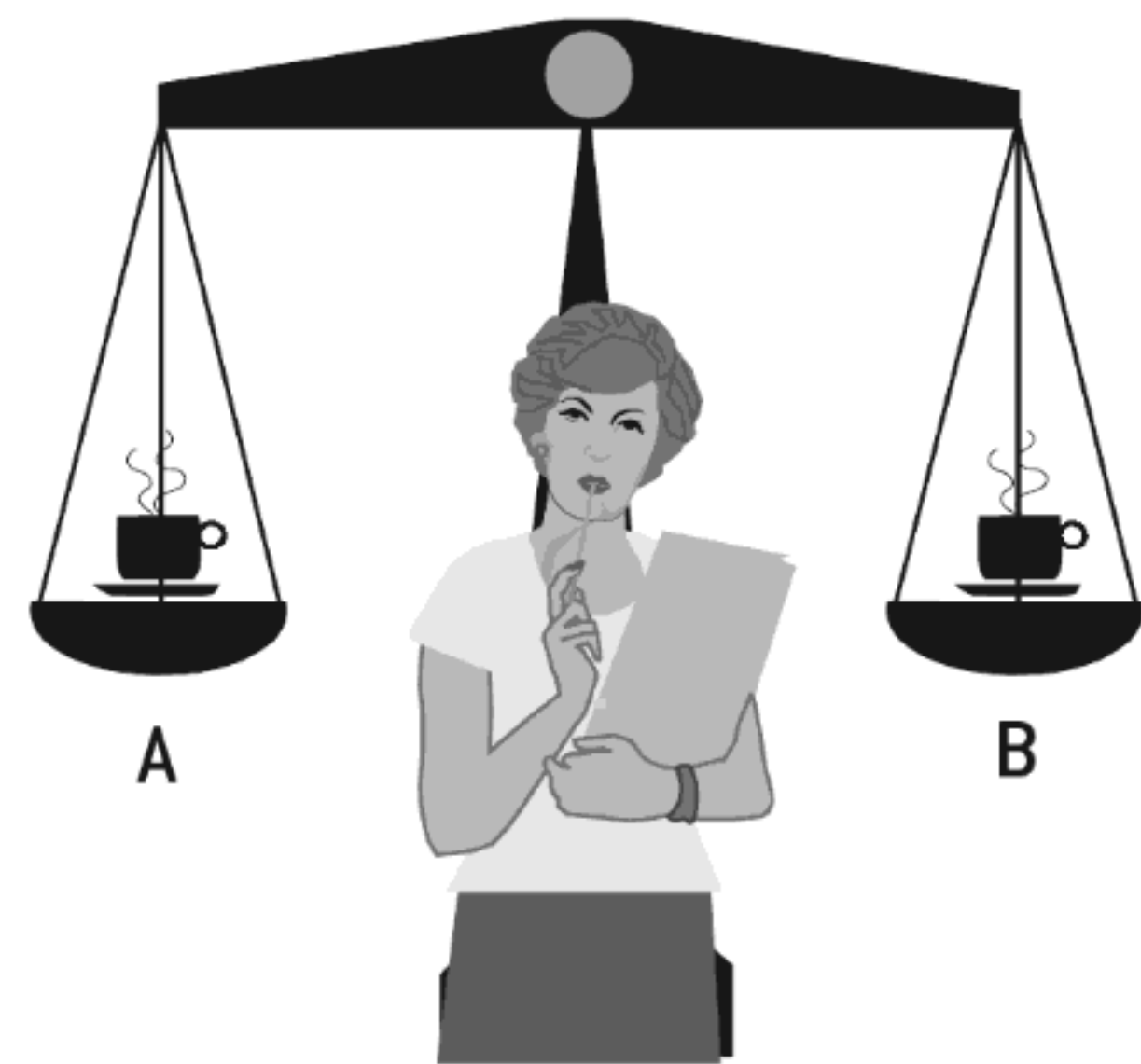


Figure 1.1: Low-involvement decision: deciding between two virtually identical alternatives.

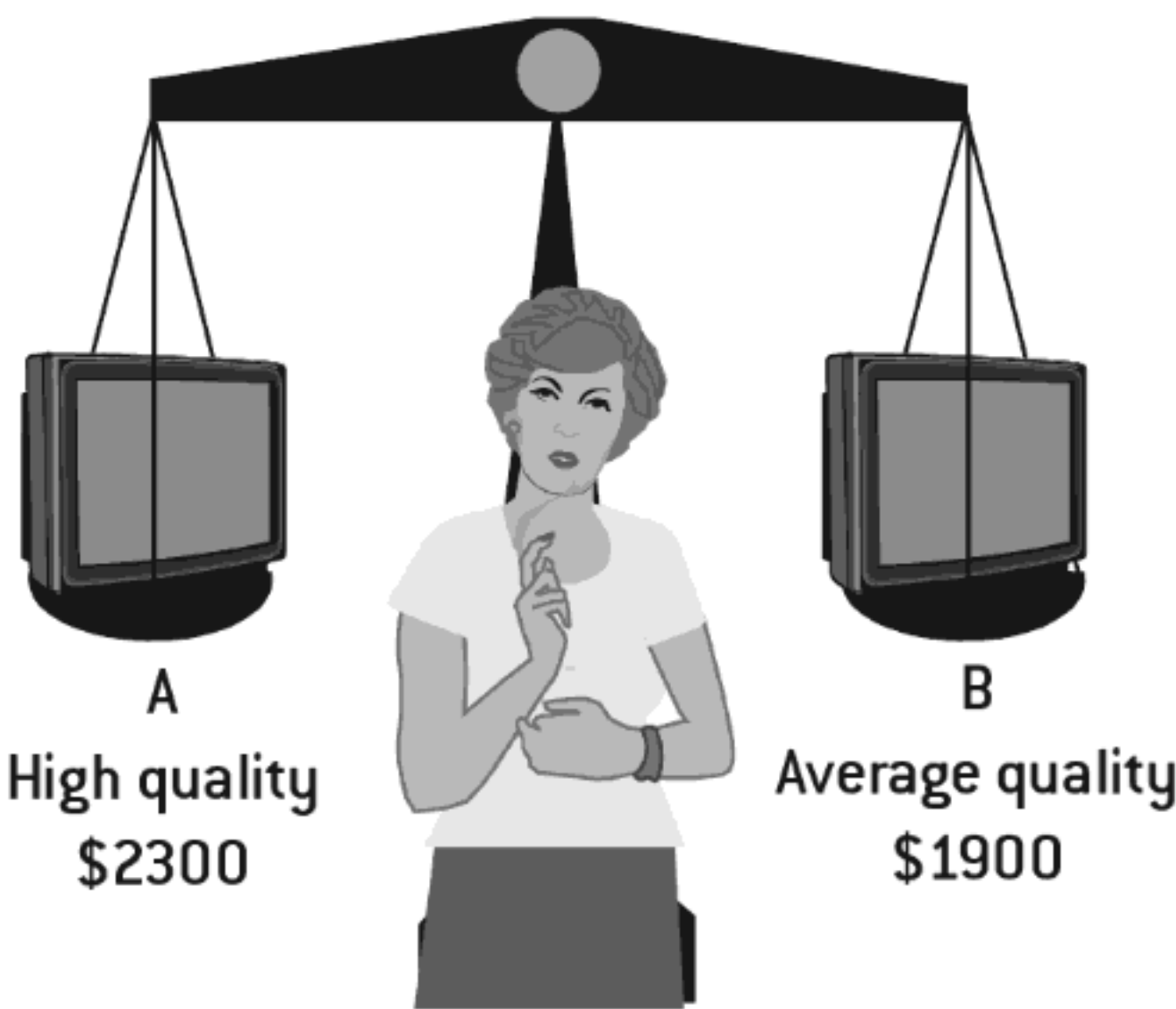


Figure 1.2: High-involvement decision: very different alternatives can have equal weight.

With high-involvement decisions we are more concerned about the outcome of the weighing-up process, so we think more about how much weight to give to each feature (quality, size or power). How many extra dollars is it worth paying for a feature? Automotive writers for example can reach very different opinions. The more complex a product's features the more complex this assessment because there are usually both positive and negative perspectives. For example, a compact car is positive in regard to both fuel economy and maneuverability but negative in regard to leg room and comfort.

So which way should we see it? What weight *should* we give to a particular feature in our minds? When advertising emphasizes points that favor a brand, it doesn't have to *persuade* us—merely raise our awareness of the positive perspectives. Chances are we will notice *confirmatory* evidence more easily as a result. When we subsequently read a newspaper or consumer report or talk with friends, research shows that we are prone to interpret such information slightly more favorably.³ This effect is a long way from heavyweight persuasion. Rather it is a gentle, mental biasing of our subsequent perceptions, and we will see in Chapter 2 how perspective can influence our interpretation. It is not so much persuasion as a shifting of the mental spotlight . . . playing the focal beam of attention on one perspective rather than another.

Repetition

As with the amount by which our kids grow in a day, we are just not aware of the small differences advertising can make. Even though these imperceptibly small changes in time add up to significant effects, individual

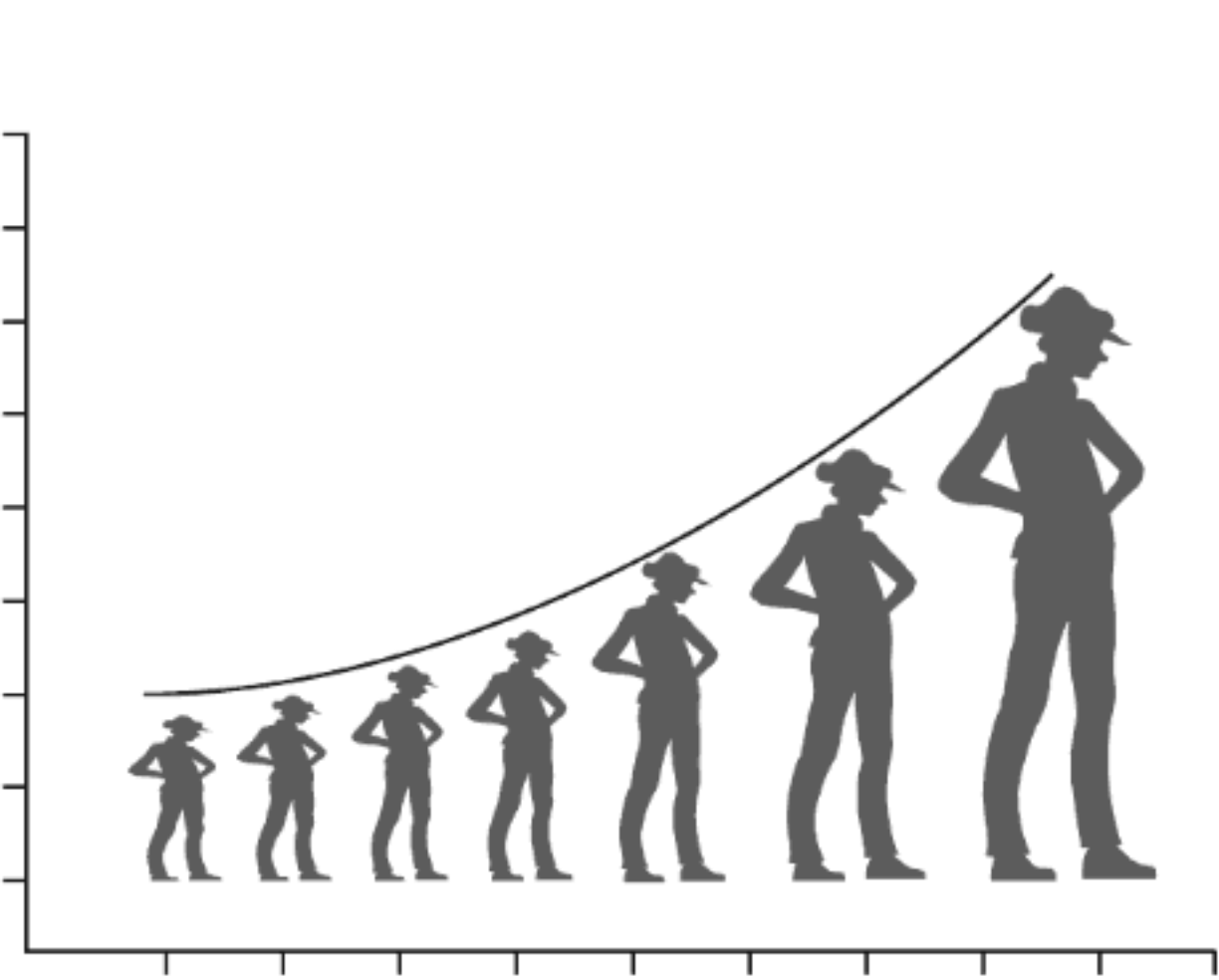


Figure 1.3: Small cumulative increments. We don't notice a child's growth in 24 hours.

increments are too small for us to notice. They are just below what is known as the just noticeable difference (JND).

Through the process of repetition these small increments can produce major perceived differences between brands, but we are rarely aware of the process taking place.

The cumulative effects of changes in brand image become starkly noticeable only in rare cases:

for instance, when we return home after a long absence and find that an old brand is now seen by people in a different light—that in the intervening period the brand has acquired a different image.

Registering a claim in our minds (e.g. ‘Taste the difference’ or ‘Good to the last drop’) does not necessarily mean we believe it. However, it makes us aware that there *are* claimed differences between brands. This is a proposition (a ‘feather’, if you will) that, when everything else is equal, may tip the balance of brand selection, even if only to prompt us to find out if it is true.

Repetition increases our familiarity with a claim. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, a feeling of greater likelihood that the claim *is* true begins to accompany the growing familiarity. This effect of repetition is known as ‘the truth effect’.⁴

We tend to think that if something is not true it would somehow be challenged. If it is repeated constantly and not challenged, our minds seem to regard this as *prima facie* evidence that perhaps it is true. The effect of repetition is to produce small but cumulative increments in this ‘truth’ inference.⁵ It is hardly rational but we don’t really think about it. We don’t go out of our way to think about it because low involvement, by definition, means we don’t care much either way. Such claims are ‘feathers’.

In summary, the reasons we are unable to introspect on advertising’s effects—especially in low-involvement situations—are:

- the effect of each single ad exposure is small;⁶
- with repetition, even imperceptibly small effects can build into larger perceived differences between brands;⁷
- if something is repeated constantly without challenge, our minds seem to regard this as *prima facie* evidence that maybe, just maybe, it *is* true (the ‘truth’ effect);
- often it is no big deal to us which of the alternative brands we choose, anyway.

If you have ever wondered why advertisers seem to persist in repeating the same ad—if you have ever wondered why they think this could possibly influence sane people like us—then here is the answer. Much of advertising creates only marginal differences, but small differences can build into larger differences. Even small differences can tip the balance in favor of the advertised brand. This is especially true of ‘image advertising’.

Image advertising

The effect of image advertising is easier to see in relation to high-involvement products, so let us start with a high-involvement example—Volvo cars.

Volvo traditionally focused its image advertising on safety. Through repetition, it built up a strong image of the Volvo as a safe car. Other brands have caught up a lot in recent years but on a scale of 1 to 10 for safety, most people would still rate Volvo higher than almost any other car. Safety is now an integral part of our perception of this brand. (The fact that the car actually delivers on this promise has of course been a very important ingredient in the success of the safety campaign—but that is another story.)

One effect of image advertising, then, is to produce gradual shifts in our perceptions of a brand with regard to a particular attribute—in Volvo's case, safety (in other words, to effect marginal changes in our mental rating of the brand on that attribute). This is often not perceptible after just one exposure because the change, if it occurs, is too small for us to notice.

Now let's take a low-involvement product in the very late stages of its product life cycle—hair spray—and tease out some insights from its history of brand image advertising.

The first brands of hair spray originally fought for market share on the basis of the attribute of 'hair holding'. That is, each brand claimed to hold hair. To the extent that they all claimed the same thing, they were what are called 'me-too' brands.

To break out of this, one brand began to claim that it 'holds hair longer'. Just as Volvo claimed that it was safer, and thereby moved Volvo higher up the perceived safety scale, so this brand of hair spray made people aware that some brands of hair spray might hold hair longer than others. It then attempted to shift perception of itself on this attribute and marginally increase the mental rating consumers would give it on 'length of hold'.

The next brand of hair spray to enter the market, instead of tackling that brand head-on, cleverly avoided doing battle on 'length of hold'. The new brand claimed that it was 'long holding', but also that it 'brushes out easier'—a dual benefit. In doing so it successfully capitalized on the fact that hair sprays that hold longer were harder to brush out (or were until then). Many years later came the attribute of 'flexible hold'.

These examples of image advertising for hair spray and cars illustrate how one effect of advertising is to alter our perceptions of a brand. Advertising can marginally change our image of a brand by leading us to associate it with a particular attribute (like ‘longer holding’ or ‘brushes out easily’), and to associate in our minds that attribute with the brand more than we associate it with any other competitive brand.

Gauging the effects image advertising has on us is made even more complex because these effects may not operate directly on the image of the brand itself. Image advertising may produce small, incremental differences in the image of a brand, as in the case of Volvo—but sometimes it is aimed at changing not so much the image of the brand itself but who we see in our mind’s eye as the typical user of that brand.

User image

In advertising for Levis, Revlon, Guess, Louis Vuitton, or Dolce & Gabbana, the focus is often on people who use the brand. What changes is not so much our perception, or image, of the product as our perception of the user-stereotype—the kind of person who typically uses the brand, or the situation in which the brand is typically used.

When these brands are advertised, the focus is very much on image but often with this important, subtle difference. The advertising aims to change not how we see the brand itself—the brand image—but how we see:

- the stereotypical user of the brand—the user image;
- the stereotypical situation in which the brand is used.

If the user image of a brand resembles us, or the type of person we aspire to be, what happens when we come to buy that product category? The user image acts as a feather on one side of the beam balance. If everything else is equal it can tip the scale (but note, only if everything else is equal).

User, or situational, image changes usually fall short of the kinds of rational, heavyweight reasons that make perfect sense of any choice.



Figure 1.4: Jim Beam ad reinforcing the stereotypical user image—young, single males.

But they can nevertheless tilt the balance in favor of one brand. Minor effects such as these constitute much of the impact of advertising. Yet they are usually much more difficult for us as consumers to analyze introspectively, and we tend to discount them because they clearly fall well short of persuasion.

Product image: bottled water

Advertising can marginally change our image not just of a brand but also of a product. When we associate a product in our minds with a desirable attribute, it can influence our behavior. Let's examine the question posed earlier. Why do people purchase so much bottled water when perfectly good water is available almost free from the tap?

The question is, are we in fact drinking bottled water as a substitute for tap water? It may seem that way . . . but is it? Certainly that is not the way it started. In the USA particularly, bottled water's success can be traced to its original positioning as a substitute not for water but for cocktails and non-alcoholic soda/soft drinks. The image appeal and usage evolved from there.

Let me explain.⁸ In 1977, an American, Bruce Nevin, brought Perrier bottled water to the USA and launched it as a pure and healthier alternative for when you were having a cocktail or some non-alcoholic soda.⁹ Consistent with the new emphasis on a healthy lifestyle, it was positioned as an accepted, healthier alternative, especially (though not exclusively) when consumed in social situations. The brand name 'Perrier' helped this social acceptance, giving it an up-market 'designer' connotation consistent with France's fashion and wine image. In addition, the Perrier launch commercials starred Orson Welles, thereby blending celebrity associations with this product. Its appeal as a healthier substitute was buttressed by purity and celebrity and this worked to make Perrier a huge success. With the media constantly urging us to eat more healthily and drink less alcohol, the brand took off. Perrier bottled water became a socially acceptable alternative to drinking alcohol and drinking soda/soft drinks that were not so healthy. Perrier sold US\$20 million of bottled water in its first year in the US and tripled its sales to US\$60 million the next year. This ultimately attracted other 'me-too' entrants.

The next major entrant in the USA was Evian, coming seven years later in 1984. Evian did a 'me-too' with pure and healthy while at the same

time playing the spotlight of attention on difference in taste. Reportedly, research showed that Americans preferred a still taste to a sparkling taste and Perrier was a *sparkling* water. So Evian offered a still taste and avoided claiming that it was healthier, but instead cleverly associated the brand with a different aspect of health i.e. active lifestyles and the gymnasium—images associated with young, healthy, toned bodies. Consistent with this active lifestyles image, Evian matched Perrier on celebrity associations by using cool, young celebrities like Madonna (who would drink it on stage).

Such positioning was reinforced even further by Evian being the first to offer a lightweight plastic bottle nationwide. Evian's lighter, unbreakable bottle was easier to carry and more suitable for on-the-go lifestyles than Perrier's signature glass bottle. In other words, Evian not only matched Perrier on purity, health, French name connotation and celebrity endorsement but it also projected a user image appeal of toned, active, good looking bodies. If that was not enough of a feather to tip the balance, then being more convenient to carry meant that it was not only 'cool' but functional. This paid double dividends for Evian; it extended the way bottled water was consumed and broadened the market to 'active lifestyle', socially visible situations.

As new, lower cost entrants like Dusani (from Coca-Cola) and Aquafina (from Pepsi) came in, the usage of bottled water evolved and extended, further becoming somewhat more commodified. Nevertheless the basic heritage of health and purity is intact and bottled water remains better for us than either soda/soft drink or alcohol. As Charles Fishman noted in his article 'Message in a Bottle', '... today, water has come to signify how we think of ourselves. We want to brand ourselves—as Madonna did—even with something as ordinary as a drink of water ... We imagine there is a difference between showing up at the weekly staff meeting with Aquafina, or Fiji, or a small glass bottle of Pellegrino.'¹⁰

The reason we drink bottled water today is partly self branding and partly self statement about healthier lifestyle choices. Did advertising persuade us to use bottled water instead of tap water? No. Did it persuade us to use bottled water instead of less healthy alcohol and sodas? Perhaps that's closer to the mark, but did anyone feel any persuasion? No. It was not persuasion so much as a series of image influences where virtue, convenience, self branding and self statement were aligned.

Persuasion is the exception

We have been told so often that the role of advertising is to persuade, that we seem to have come to believe it.

How often do we hear the comment, ‘It wouldn’t make me run out and buy it?’ This is common in market research when participants are asked to analyze introspectively how they react to an ad—especially if it is an image ad. It demonstrates the myth of how advertising is supposed to influence. No one really believes that any ad will make them run out and buy the advertised product. Nothing has that kind of persuasive or coercive power. So why do people say, ‘It wouldn’t make me run out and buy it?’ Because they can’t think of any other way the ad could work. The effect of advertising is not to make us ‘run out and buy’. This is especially true with low-involvement products and especially true with image advertising. Rather, it is beam balance stuff.

High involvement

High-involvement buying contrasts with low-involvement, low cost purchases. When people are parting with substantial sums of money to buy a TV, a car or a vacation, they do not take the decision lightly. These are high-involvement decisions for most consumers. Before making them, we actively hunt down information, talk with friends and generally find out all we can about our prospective purchase.

Furthermore, the alternative brands available will usually have many more differences. They are unlikely to be almost identical, as is the case with many low-involvement products.

Advertising is one influence in high-involvement buying decisions, but it is only one among many. Often it is a relatively weak influence, especially in comparison with other influences like word of mouth, previous experience and recommendations by ‘experts’. In the case of high-involvement products, much of advertising’s effect is not so much on the final decision as on whether a brand gets considered—whether we include it in the set of alternatives that we are prepared to spend time weighing up. This is one of the ways that advertising influences our thinking indirectly. For example, there are hundreds of brands and types of cars, far too many for us to consider individually in the same detail. We seriously consider only those that make it onto our short list. But what determines which cars make it onto our short list? This is where advertising comes into play.¹¹

If we are unlikely to be in the market for a new car, television or wall unit for several years, the advertising we see and hear for these products falls on low-involved ears. However, if our old car or appliance unexpectedly breaks down today, we may find ourselves propelled into the market for a new one. Suddenly, the ads we saw yesterday or last week or last month under low-involvement conditions become more relevant. One test of their effectiveness will be whether they have left enough impact to get their brand onto our short list.

A lot of advertising, even for high-priced items, thus has its effect in a low-involvement way. Again we see that, in looking for the effects of advertising, we need to look for subtle effects. It is a case of ‘feathers’ rather than persuasion—‘feathers’ that influence what alternatives get weighed up as well as ‘feathers’ that add their weight to one side of the weighing-up process.

Two mental processes in decision-making

There are two fundamentally different mental processes at work in choice decisions. We have already considered the most obvious one, the weighing up of alternatives. But there is another process that consumers and advertisers tend to be less conscious of. *Weighing up the alternatives is one thing. Which alternatives get weighed up is another!*

Which alternatives get weighed up?

What determines the alternatives that are actually considered?

Think about a consumer decision that you probably make every day. It’s getting on for noon, you are feeling hungry and you ask yourself, ‘What am I going to have for lunch today?’ Your mind starts to generate alternatives and evaluate each alternative as you think of it. The process goes something like this:

- ‘Will I have a salad? No, I had a salad yesterday.’
- ‘A sandwich? No, the sandwich store is too far away and besides, it’s raining.’
- ‘I could drive to McDonald’s. Yes . . . I’ll do that.’

There are two things to note here. First, what the mind does is produce alternatives, one at a time. This ‘mental agenda’ of alternatives is ordered like this:

What's the choice for lunch?

1. Salad
2. Sandwich
3. McDonald's
4. TGI Friday's
5. Subway

Second, the order in which the alternatives are arranged is the order in which they are elicited by the mind. This order can influence your final choice. You may enjoy Subway more than McDonald's. But in the example, you didn't go to Subway, you went to McDonald's.

Had you continued your thought process instead of stopping at the third alternative (McDonald's), you would probably have gone to Subway. But if Subway is only fifth on your mental agenda of lunch alternatives, it is unlikely to get much of your business. You didn't get to Subway because you didn't think of it before you hit on a satisfactory solution—McDonald's. You didn't get there *physically* because you never got there *mentally*. Even if we like or prefer something, if it is not reasonably high on our mental agenda it is likely to miss out.

How many times have you found yourself doing something and realized too late that there was something else you would rather have been doing but hadn't thought about in time? The most preferred alternatives are not necessarily the ones you think of first. (Anyone who has ever left an important person off an invitation list will appreciate this.) Next time you go out for dinner and are trying to decide which restaurant to go to, observe your thought pattern. There are two separate processes at work. One is generation of alternatives; the other is evaluation of those alternatives.

To affect the outcome of buying decisions, advertisers can try to influence:

- the order in which the alternatives are evoked;
- the evaluation of a particular alternative; or
- both.

When we think of advertising's effects we almost invariably think of how advertising influences our evaluation of a brand. Yet much of advertising's influence is not on our evaluations of a brand but on the order in which alternative brands are evoked.

Agenda-setting effect

Influencing the order of alternatives has its basis in what is known as the agenda-setting theory of mass communications. This says: the mass media don't tell us what to think. But they do tell us what to think about! They set the mental agenda.

The agenda-setting theory was originally developed to explain the influence of the mass media in determining which political issues become important in elections. Adroit committee members and politicians claim that if you can control the agenda you can control the meeting. The relevance of this to advertising was recognized over a quarter of a century ago.¹² We can produce mental agendas for lots of things.

Table 1.1 Mental agendas for lots of things

What's news?	What's the choice for lunch?
1. Presidential election	1. Salad
2. The stock market	2. Sandwich
3. Youth suicide rate	3. McDonald's
4. A child abducted	4. TGI Friday's
5. The Olympics	5. Subway

We can discover our mental agenda by pulling out what is in our minds under a particular category and examining the order (in which it emerges). The category may be 'What's the choice for lunch?', 'What's news?', or 'What brand of soft drink should I buy?'

When we reach into our minds to generate any of these agendas, the items do not all come to mind at once. They are elicited one at a time and in an order. The items on top of the mental agenda are the most salient and the ones we are most likely to remember first. It's the same with choosing which restaurant to go to or which department store to visit or which supermarket to shop at this week. It is the same with the decision about which cars or televisions to short-list and which dealers to visit. The order in which we retrieve the items from our memories seems almost inconsequential to us but may be critically important in determining the chances of our going to McDonald's rather than Subway.

This effect also occurs if we have a list of the alternatives or a display of them such as in the supermarket. Even here, where the brands are all

set out in front of us, all of them do not get noticed simultaneously. In fact, they do not all get noticed.

Think about the process. We stand there at the display. We notice first one brand, then another and then another. It happens rapidly, but in sequence. So despite the fact that the brands are all displayed, they are not necessarily all equal in terms of the probability that they will come to mind or be noticed. For the last decade, supermarkets have carried more than 30,000 items, up from 17,500 a decade before.¹³ This raises a question. At supermarket displays, what makes a brand stand out? To use the marketing term, what makes it 'break through the clutter' of all the alternative packs and get noticed? What makes one brand get noticed more quickly than others at the supermarket display?

This introduces the concept of *salience*, which is formally defined in the next section. In this context we ask how a brand can be moved up from fifth, to fourth, to third, to second, to become the first one noticed. The higher up it is in this order, the better the chance it has of being considered and, consequently, the better the chance of being purchased.

The brand's physical prominence, the amount of shelf space it occupies and its position in the display are very important. But advertising can influence choice when other factors (like shelf space or position) are otherwise equal. Advertising can help tip the balance.

Asking what makes one brand more salient—more likely to come to mind or get noticed—than another is like asking what influences Subway's position on our mental lunch agenda. In the supermarket, instead of having to recall all the alternatives by ourselves, we are prompted by the display. However, the brands we notice and the order in which we notice them can be influenced by more than just the display.

Salience

We think much more often about people and things that are important to us than about those that are not. The psychological term for this prominence in our thoughts is *salience*. Advertisers would like us to think of their brands as 'more important' but they will settle for 'more often'.¹⁴ In other words, they would like their brands to be more salient for us.

My definition of salience is the probability that something will be in the conscious mind at any given moment. One way advertising can increase this probability is through repetition. We have all had the experience of being unable to rid our minds of a song we have heard a lot. The

repetition of the song has increased its salience; it has increased its probability of being in the conscious mind at any moment. Repetition of an advertisement, especially a jingle, can have a similar effect. Through repetition of the ad, the salience of the brand—the star of the ad—is increased in our minds.

Another way that advertising influences what we think about and notice is through ‘cueing’. To explain this, answer a few questions:

- What’s the first thing you think of when you see: *‘Just Do It’*?
- What’s the first thing you think of when someone says: *‘Don’t leave home without it’*?
- What comes to mind if you hear the remark: *‘I’m lovin’ it’*?
- What’s the first thing you think of when someone says: *‘Can you hear me now’*?
- What’s the first thing you think of when someone asks *‘Where’s the beef?’* in America or *‘Which bank?’* in Australia?

Words or expressions such as these come up naturally in everyday conversation. When a brand is linked to them through repetition, they become cues that help increase the salience of the brand.

An actor in a play takes his cue from a line or some other happening or event. The human mind takes its cue from its intentions and its immediate environment. Such cues can influence what we think about next.¹⁵ That’s how we go to sleep at night. We turn off the cues. We turn off the light and the radio. We try to reduce distractions or cues so that things won’t keep popping into our minds.

One way advertising can use cues is by tying a brand to something that frequently recurs in the ordinary environment. There are many common words, expressions, symbols or tunes that can be developed by means of repetition into mnemonic devices that trigger recollection of the brand.

Table 1.2 Common brand cues

Cue (mnemonic)	Brand/product	Country
<i>I'm lovin' it</i>	McDonald's	Global
<i>You're in good hands</i>	Allstate Insurance	USA
<i>Take care</i>	Garnier	Global
<i>Can you hear me now?</i>	Verizon	USA
<i>Gimme a break</i>	<i>Have a Kit Kat</i>	USA
<i>Have a break . . .</i>	<i>Have a Kit Kat</i>	UK, Australia
<i>Mmmmmmmm . . .</i>	Big M flavored milk	Australia
<i>MmmmmMmmmmm Good</i>	Campbell's Soup	USA
<i>Don't leave home without it . . .</i>	American Express	Global
<i>Do you know me?</i>	American Express	Global
<i>Just do it.</i>	Nike	Global
<i>Where do you want to go today?</i>	Microsoft	Global
<i>The real thing . . .</i>	Coca-Cola	Global
<i>Always . . .</i>	Coca-Cola	Global
<i>Think different.</i>	Apple	Global
<i>Because you're worth it . . .</i>	L'Oreal	Global
<i>Reach out and touch someone</i>	AT&T	USA
<i>Thanks! I needed that!</i>	Mennen Skin Bracer	USA
<i>Have a good weekend . . .</i>	<i>(& don't forget the Aeroguard)</i> insect repellant	Australia
<i>Good weekend . . . good VSD</i>	VSD Magazine	France
<i>Which bank?</i>	Commonwealth Bank	Australia
<i>Wednesday . . .</i>	<i>is Prince Spaghetti night</i>	USA
<i>Good on you mum . . .</i>	<i>Tip Top's the one.</i> Bread	Australia
<i>Where's the beef?</i>	Wendys Restaurants	USA

Cue (mnemonic)	Brand/product	Country
<i>The car in front is . . .</i>	<i>(a Toyota)</i>	UK
<i>Oh what a feeling ...</i>	<i>(Toyota)</i>	USA, Australia
<i>Ring around the collar</i>	Wisk detergent	USA
<i>Anyhow* . . .</i>	<i>Have a Winfield</i> Cigarettes	Australia
<i>I feel like . . .</i>	<i>. . . a Tooheys</i> Tooheys beer	Australia
<i>Who cares?</i>	Boots pharmacies	UK
<i>You deserve a break today</i>	McDonald's	USA, UK, Australia
<i>Thank you for your support</i>	Bartles and Jaymes wine	USA
<i>All because . . .</i>	<i>the lady loves . . . Milk</i> <i>Tray</i>	UK
<i>Cross your heart</i>	Playtex bras	UK, Australia

If the cue recurs in the circumstances under which the product is likely to be consumed, such as at lunch time, all the better. The ideal mnemonic cue is not just frequently recurring but occurs *at these strategic times*.

This cueing effect is so much a part of the way we respond to our environment that we are largely oblivious to it. As someone once said, fish are probably unaware of water because it is all round them. However, most people are aware of cueing to some degree. Almost everybody has had the experience of a particular smell evoking special memories. Cigars perhaps remind you of your grandfather; the smell of new carpet may trigger a vivid memory of the first day you moved into your new house. When these memories pop into our mind we are then prone to reminisce on those past days.

If you have ever had trouble getting to sleep at night because your mind can't switch off, you can relate to how involuntary this process usually is. In other words, what pops into our minds at any point in time is not totally under our control.

When you hear the words 'Don't leave home without . . .', the speaker may be referring to your keys or your coat or whatever . . . but your mind

is involuntarily reminded of American Express. When a driver assures you ‘You’re in good hands’, can your mind help but be reminded of Allstate Insurance? When someone says ‘Just do it’, can you help but think of Nike?

Celebrities, expressions and music extracts can come to be so ‘owned’ by a brand that they automatically prompt our thoughts in that direction. In the USA, Paul Hogan (Crocodile Dundee) was linked to the Subaru brand. In Australia he was traditionally linked to Winfield cigarettes. The word ‘Anyhow*’ still makes older Australians think of Paul Hogan and Winfield cigarettes because it was uttered by Hogan as part of the commercial (‘Anyhow* . . . Have a Winfield’). Like Joe Camel in the USA, Hogan and the expression ‘Anyhow*’ came to stand for the brand and automatically trigger it in people’s minds. Even the classical theme music behind the



Figure 1.5: In Australia, Paul Hogan triggered instant recall of the brand Winfield.

Winfield campaign came to be thought of as ‘the Winfield music’ and would recall the brand in people’s memories. The Marlboro brand did the same thing globally with the theme music from *The Magnificent Seven*, which came to be thought of as ‘the Marlboro music’.

Our minds are in a sense a ‘stream of consciousness’—an inexorable flow that is frequently diverted, sometimes paused but never stopped. Environmental cues can influence what enters the flow and what direction it takes. One type of advertising focuses on tying a brand to one or more such cues, so that whenever we hear, see or think

of the cue there is a high probability that we will think of the brand or notice its presence. It pulls it into our ‘slipstream of thought’.¹⁶

The product category as a cue

Advertisers want us to think of their brand, but they particularly want us to think of their brand when we are making a decision involving the product category. One important cue is therefore the category itself. When I say ‘soft drink’, what do you think of? When I say ‘lunch’, what do you think of? If our conscious mind is in the process of being cued by a

product category (e.g. it is noon and we are thinking ‘lunch’), then what is likely to flit into our head is not a brand of hair gel or a car—we are much more likely to see in our mind’s eye the first item on the mental agenda we have for the category ‘lunch’.

When our mind is cued in to a particular product category, we almost automatically begin to think of the ‘top-of-mind’ members of that category. In the case of the category ‘lunch’, we will think of McDonald’s or Subway or some other food alternative rather than hair gel or cars or anything else.

The technical term for this is *category-cued salience*, or the probability that the brand will come to mind whenever its product category does.

It is possible to measure category-cued salience and assess the influence of advertising on it. This is done by asking people what is the first brand that comes to mind when they hear or see the product category name, and then the next brand and the next.¹⁷ In this way the agenda of brands can be elicited. The rank of a given brand in the product category agenda indicates its category-cued salience. It is a rough index of the probability that it will come to our mind when in the normal course of events we are prompted by the product category name.

If this questioning procedure is carried out periodically with a different random sample of consumers, the agenda and the salience of each brand can be tracked, over time. Market research can detect any improvements resulting from advertising by the order in which the advertised brand is elicited. Advertising a brand generally improves its salience.

Point-of-sale advertising: how to upset the agenda

Many people wonder why Coca-Cola, which is so well known, needs to advertise so much and why it needs to ‘waste all that money’ on signage. The answer is that if it did not have its signs in these places, Pepsi or some other competitor certainly would. These other brands would try to upset consumers’ mental agendas by ‘jumping the queue’—by inducing us, at the point of sale, to consider them as well as Coke.

Both point-of-sale, reminder advertising and our own mental agenda of brands can prompt us with alternatives to consider, before we ask for what we want. Advertisers therefore try to influence a brand’s salience at the point of sale by not leaving it to our mental agendas alone. They erect signs in an attempt to visually cue us into their brand.

When we walk into a convenience store to buy a soft drink, we are already in a category-cued state. We are already thinking about soft drink and which one we will have. If Coke is not already top of our mind when we enter, it almost inescapably will be once we have been inside for a moment, because Coke as a brand is likely to be prompted in our minds by a) the product category cue and b) the Coca-Cola signs in the store.

Coke may be on top of most people's minds but if they are confronted with a Pepsi sign they may consider both brands. So Coke tries to dominate the clutter of mental alternatives as well as the clutter of point-of-sale advertising and point-of-sale display. This makes it difficult for other brands to cut through into people's minds at the point of sale.¹⁸ It protects Coke's category salience—something that it has invested a lot of money in building up through years of advertising.

Supermarket shopping: mental agendas vs brand displays

In the supermarket it may be thought that, because the brands are all displayed, they are all equally likely to be noticed—and considered. If this were so, then our mental agenda of brands would be irrelevant to supermarket shopping. However, this is not the case.

On average, people take no more than 12 seconds to select a brand and in 85 per cent of purchases only the chosen brand is handled.¹⁹ Observation studies of supermarket shoppers indicate that more than half of all buying is just 'simple locating behavior'.²⁰ That is, most people are simply locating the brand they bought last time, or the one that they came in to buy. They put it into their shopping cart with little or no attention to evaluating the alternatives.

For an alternative brand or pack to be noticed, let alone considered, it would have to cut through the display clutter and stand out in some way. In order to be considered it first has to cut through into conscious attention.

In low-involvement situations many people tend to do what they did last time unless there is something to interrupt the routine. Thus a brand or pack has to cut through the display clutter just as an ad has to cut through the clutter of other ads. And the two, the pack and the advertising, can work together.

The importance of being noticed shows up when regular buyers of a product category are shown color photographs of any new brand. Without advertising and promotional support, the percentage saying that

they have seen it on the supermarket shelves will likely remain very low. Of course supermarkets know this and that's why they insist on a new brand being backed by advertising and promotional support if they agree to stock it.

Just because something is present does not mean we will necessarily notice it or consider it. The more cluttered the environment, the more alternatives there are in the product category, the greater this problem is for the advertiser. Advertising signs at the point of purchase can help considerably here, especially when they tie in with advertising that we have already seen. They are then more likely to 'connect' with us and get us to notice the brand.

In the supermarket, it is not signs but usually the brands themselves that are displayed. Potentially we are able to be reminded of every brand in the display by its physical presence. So is our mental agenda of brands still relevant? Yes, though it is now one influence among several. In particular, it orients us by determining which brands we notice in the display.

To illustrate this, imagine you are in a supermarket doing the shopping. As you approach the detergent section, what is in your mind? The category 'detergents'. Why? Because the layout of the supermarket is familiar to you, or because when you approach that section the category is prompted by the display in front of you.

Even in the supermarket, then, the product category as a cue is likely to be triggered in our minds at a particular point and to trigger in turn expectations of the brands we are likely to see in that category. What we see first in the display is likely to be influenced not only by a brand's position and shelf space but also by our expectations of seeing the brand there. All other things being equal, we tend to notice first the brands we are familiar with. Of course, this is especially true when our mind set is that of looking to locate the one that we bought last time.

When something is heavily advertised, it is more likely to come to mind and, other things being equal, to be noticed faster in a display. We know from the psychological literature that people recognize the familiar more quickly, so it will come as no surprise that familiar brands will be very salient and be noticed more quickly.²¹ Advertising exposure of the brand and the pack helps to make the brand more familiar and increase its salience. Repeated exposure of the pack in advertising makes it more familiar and hence gives it a better chance of being noticed earlier or faster than its competitor.

T T T T	F F F F	U U U U
T T T T	F F F F	U U U U
T T T T	F F F F	U U U U
T T T T	F F F F	U U U U
T T T T	F F F F	U U U U
T T T T	F F F F	U U U U
T T T T	F F F F	U U U U
T T T T	F F F F	U U U U

Figure 1.6: Visual salience—the ‘pop-out’ effect. Inclined letters ‘pop-out’ more than upside down letters.²²

Shelf displays, shelf ‘talkers’ and off-location displays are all ways to help a brand ‘pop out’ and get our attention. Advertising that we have been exposed to previously, however, also plays an important part in increasing the visual salience of a particular brand. The aim is to modify the degree to which the brand ‘pops out’ in the display and engages the shopper’s notice earlier than other brands.

Measuring visual salience

Advertisers can quantify the visual salience of a pack or brand through market research in much the same way as they uncover the mental agenda. They give each brand in a supermarket display equal shelf space and then take a photograph of the display. They show the photo to a random sample of consumers and ask them to name the brands they see. The order and speed with which the brands are noticed provide a measure of their visual salience. (Actually, researchers use several photographs and control for position in the display by randomly changing the position of each brand.)

Summary

One reason we find it difficult to analyze advertising’s effects introspectively and why advertising has remained a mystery for so long is that these effects are often so simple and so small that they fall short of outright persuasion. Advertising influences the order in which we evoke or notice the alternatives we consider. This does not feel like persuasion and it is not. It is nevertheless effective. Instead of persuasion and other

The importance of this marginal effect is seen in the finding mentioned above—that more than half of all purchases made in the supermarket are simply the purchaser locating what they want. Shoppers hardly pause at the display but simply reach out and pick up the item they are after. So in the supermarket a brand or pack has to cut through the clutter—to stop people walking at more than 1 mile per hour (2 km/h)—and get itself noticed.

major effects we should look for ‘feathers’, or minor effects. These can tip the balance when alternative brands are otherwise equal and, through repetition, can grow imperceptibly by small increments over time.

2 IMAGE AND REALITY: SEEING THINGS IN DIFFERENT WAYS

In Chapter 1 we considered the ways in which advertising can influence our decisions by influencing the order in which we evoke or notice the options. Now let us turn to advertising and focus on how it influences our *evaluation* of brand alternatives.

Human beings have a remarkable capacity for seeing things in different ways. The same physical stimulus, the same product or service, if you will, can be seen in more than one way. Look at Figure 2.1 . . . is it a rabbit or a duck? It can be seen either way.

Look at the next figure, 2.2. Think of it as a brand. You should be able to see it in two different ways. When you see a vase in the figure your mind is seeing ‘white figure on black background’. When you see two faces, your mind is seeing ‘black figure on white background’. This white-on-black or black-on-white that you are using to make sense of what you see is called the *frame of reference*. You overlay a frame of reference on a stimulus to generate a perception.

A brand, company or service can also be perceived in different ways



Figure 2.1: *Is it a rabbit or a duck?*¹

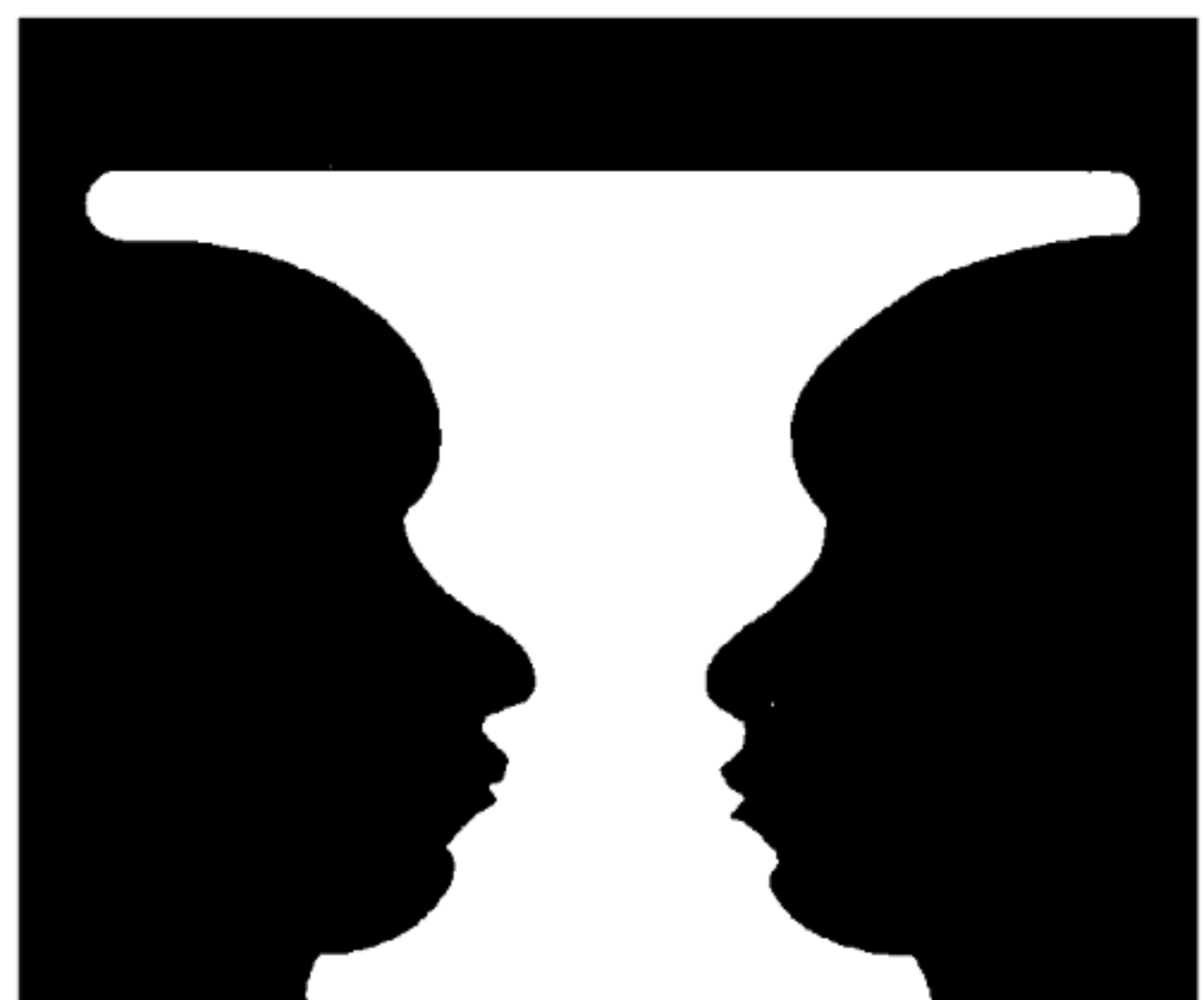


Figure 2.2: *A vase or two faces?*

depending upon the frame of reference that people bring to it. Frame of reference is a psychological term that refers to a mind set or previous experience.

Evaluating a brand

When we evaluate brands we try to do so by evaluating their attributes or features. This is not always a straightforward task, for two reasons. First, there is the problem of what attributes the brand has. Second, there is the problem of how to interpret these attributes.

For example, with the brand Volvo you might think of heavy construction, safety, conservative styling and so on. Heavy construction is closely related to safety, which you rate positively. But you may also associate it with poorer fuel economy, a negative feature. Thus the same attribute, heavy construction, can be rated positively or negatively depending on how you look at it. Similarly, large size may suggest either comfort (a positive) or poor fuel economy (a negative). And fabric seat coverings are more comfortable than faux-leather but are harder to keep clean.

Our minds can interpret any attribute positively or negatively. For example, our attitudes towards ground beef vary markedly depending whether it is labeled '75 per cent lean' or '25 per cent fat'.² There are upsides and downsides to almost anything in life and a brand's features are no exception.

Positively or negatively charged features

'Choice between brands is driven largely by simple associations between the brand and attributes or **emotions** usually created and sustained through advertising.'³ Attribute or emotional associations can greatly influence the way we feel about something. 'Cars are imaged variously as shields against accidents, reliable companions, virile athletes or purveyors of fun.'⁴ Similar variations occur in our images of other types of categories. Think for example of the image you associate with these:

- professions (lawyers, advertisers, doctors, car salespeople);
- countries (France, USA, Australia);
- cities (Sydney, London, New York);
- organizations (International Monetary Fund, United Nations, OPEC);
- corporations (Apple, Microsoft, Wal-Mart, Neiman Marcus);

- brands (Toshiba, Sony, Hewlett Packard);
- services (Speedy Mufflers, Qantas, Virgin Atlantic, DHL);
- product categories (pearls, wine, motorcycles).

Consider the product category ‘pearls’. Most people think of pearls as beautiful jewelry, whose salient associations are with gift-giving, attractive women, high fashion and expensiveness. But like any product, pearls also have non-salient features, aspects most people tend not to think of unless their attention is drawn to them for some reason.



Figure 2.3: An advertisement for Mikimoto pearls.

To pursue the example, a competitor of Mikimoto pearls (perhaps DeBeers diamonds) may seek to remind us of these other attributes because it wants us to buy diamonds instead of pearls. It may point out that a pearl is more easily damaged than a diamond (a small feather). Or it could point out that a pearl is an oyster tumor. Ugh! What unpleasant associations that statement triggers (a much bigger feather).

Under normal circumstances, however, we would never have cause to think about these aspects of pearls. Nevertheless, we would have to agree that both are true. The information that a pearl is more easily damaged than a diamond and that a pearl is an oyster tumor are both there in our heads. But they usually occur so far down on our mental attribute agenda that we would rarely, in the normal course of thinking about pearls, bring them to mind. Neither of them is a salient feature.

Calling a pearl ‘an oyster tumor’ plays the focal beam of our attention on an unpleasant aspect of pearls. This is a ‘feather’ but in this case a potentially large one and if it were repeated often enough its salience would be likely to increase. (In a sense, this is what animal rights group PETA has done by highlighting the cruelty involved in the product category of furs.⁵) It may not make us stop buying pearls but it might take some of the shine off our perception of them.

Under normal circumstances the focal beam of our attention is only wide enough to encompass a few of the attributes of a brand or product. By shifting the spotlight and playing the focal beam of attention on other

attributes, it is possible to marginally change our perceptions. This is what the graffiti artists are trying to do when they write ‘Meat is murder’ on walls and bridges. Most people eat meat. We also know where it comes from. But we don’t want to think about it too much. If we did, we would probably all consider becoming vegetarians. The killing of animals in order to eat their flesh is hardly an association that we want to be reminded of.

Advertising influence on our brand attribute agenda

When you think of Volkswagen you perhaps think ‘economical’, ‘quirky’, ‘cute’, ‘reliable’. You could consider many other attributes, but your mind only has time to touch on a few. The advertiser wants fuel economy to be high on the Volkswagen attribute agenda. So its advertising traditionally used words and pictures to highlight the brand’s association with that attribute.

A confectionery brand could focus on attributes like fun, popularity, self indulgence, color, taste, shape or texture etc. M&M for example traditionally played the focal beam of our attention on one specific attribute: ‘Melts in your mouth, not in your hand’. Lifesavers focused on shape: ‘The candy with the hole’.

With drinks, too, there are all sorts of attributes on which an advertiser can play the focal beam of attention. Some that will be familiar are:

- Health: *Another day, another chance to feel healthy*—Evian
- Unpretentious: *Image is nothing. Taste is everything*—Sprite
- Pretentious/exclusivity: *Stella Artois—reassuringly expensive*
- Sport: *Life is a sport. Drink it up*—Gatorade
- Taste: *Just for the taste of it*—Diet Coke
- Modern/up-to-date: *Pepsi—The taste of a new generation, Generation Next*
- Thirst quenching: *Heinekin—refreshes the parts other beers can’t reach*
- Ethics: *Don’t be evil*—Google
- Flavor: *7UP, the Uncola*
- Ubiquity: *Always Coca-Cola*
- Quality/flavor: *Good to the last drop . . . Maxwell House*
- Origin: *Fosters—Australian for beer, Columbia Coffee—100% pure Columbian coffee beans.*

The chain of associations (visual or verbal) that a brand automatically triggers in our mind can be ranked in the order in which they are triggered, with the most salient ones at the top. This is the attribute agenda.

One of the most important aspects of advertising, then, is to play the focal beam of attention on a particular attribute and make that attribute more salient for us when we think of the brand.⁶ In other words, advertising influences the attribute agenda for a brand by rearranging the order in which we think of its attributes.

Using positively charged features: positioning

Words and images can be used to make the positive attributes of an advertiser's brand or product more salient; to increase the probability that when we think of that brand we will think of those positive attributes; to place them higher on the brand's attribute agenda.

What do you think of when I say 'Colgate'? Your stream of thought perhaps went something like this:

1. Toothpaste
2. Cleans teeth
3. Whitens teeth
4. Prevents decay
5. Long-lasting protection.

Now, what do you think of when I say 'Sensodyne'? Your stream of thought, heavily influenced by the name, elicits 'sensitive teeth' high up on the attribute agenda. Similarly the 'Close-Up' brand of toothpaste triggers a stream of thought that is heavily influenced by the name as well as the advertising which traditionally featured scenes of couples kissing. These play the focal beam of our attention on quite different attributes from those we associate with Colgate. Close-Up puts the brand's major selling point, the attributes associated with kissing, 'fresh breath' and 'sex appeal', high on our agenda of associations. Its attribute agenda is quite different from that of Colgate or Sensodyne.

Using negatively charged features: repositioning the opposition

Advertisers usually try to highlight the positive attributes of their own brand. An alternative strategy is to highlight the negative features of the opposition's product. We saw how this works with product categories when we discussed the examples of pearls and meat. Highlighting the negatives

in the opposition brand is referred to as *repositioning the opposition*—repositioning the opposition brand in people's minds.

Sun OpenOffice software, for example, positioned its product against the competitor Microsoft Office by using the line 'Don't let a bully keep taking your lunch money', thus highlighting the dominant, almost monopolistic position that Microsoft held in the office software area. This is not dissimilar to what the famous Avis rental car advertising campaign did in its classic campaign with the line: 'Avis. We are number two, so why should you rent from us? We try harder!' In that campaign Avis acknowledged that it was not the market leader and scored points and credibility for its honesty. At the same time it indirectly and subtly highlighted a negative attribute often associated with strong market leaders and monopolies—that they can be complacent and give poor service; that they don't try hard enough. The proposition that Avis as number two in the market would be trying harder to deliver better service was the positive flip side of this. It was given more credibility by the company's apparent honesty in admitting it was not number one.

Thus, words and images can be used to make particular negative attributes of an opposition brand or product more salient: to increase the probability that when we think of the brand we will think of that negative attribute. It is a matter of advertising influencing which attributes our minds focus on when we think of the brand. When we think of pearls or brand leaders we don't usually think of the negative attributes, and this leaves them looking attractive.

The Sprite campaign: 'Image is nothing. Taste is everything' was another attempt at highlighting a negative attribute of opposition soft drink brands. Sprite positioned itself as 'unpretentious', focused on taste and not needing to play the focal beam of attention on image hype like other soft drink brands had.

It is the fact that our minds are usually focused on the positive attributes (like 'jewelry', 'good-looking', 'valuable', 'great gift') that makes them attractive. Just as there is a mental agenda of brands that we free-associate to the product category, so there is a mental agenda of attributes that we free-associate to entities like meat or pearls, or brands like iPod, Volkswagen or Google. Advertising can make certain attributes more salient and therefore higher on a product's attribute agenda. As a consequence, when we think of the product we think of the advertised features before, and perhaps instead of, other negative but less salient attributes.

Point-of-sale advertising: attribute cueing

Just as ads or signs at the point of sale can remind us of a brand, so too they can remind us of a particular attribute of the brand.

- Coke Zero: *Great Coke taste, zero sugar.*
- BA: *The world's favorite airline . . . British Airways.*
- M&M: *Melts in your mouth, not in your hand.*
- Evian: *Your natural source of youth.*

The words and pictures used to label and describe a brand can direct our attention to quite different aspects of the same thing; they can help us to see it in different ways.

To illustrate, what do you think of when I say 'Bill Gates'? A biography of Bill Gates could conceivably carry any of the following subtitles: 'World's greatest entrepreneur', 'Computer mogul', 'Business mastermind', 'Philanthropist', 'World citizen', 'Family man'.

Bill Gates is one person but he has all of these attributes. Depending which subtitle was chosen, the book would attract a slightly different audience and have slightly different appeals. The same man is being described but what we expect to see in the book would be very much influenced by which title or description was used. Whether people bought it would be influenced by a combination of their own attribute agenda for Bill Gates and how much they are interested in business or philanthropy or family life or the state of the world. If a cue is used in the subtitle of the book, whichever one is chosen focuses our expectations differently. Each description of Bill Gates plays the focal beam of our attention and our expectations on a different attribute of the same person. It consequently influences our perceptions and our expectations and does not leave them solely to our own mental agenda.

Point-of-sale advertising does the same thing. It influences us by playing the focal beam of our attention on the brand and the featured attribute at the same time.

Influenced by the brand name

As we saw with Sensodyne and Close-Up toothpaste, advertisers try to choose the name of a brand so the name itself can help direct attention, influence people's expectations, and help determine the brand's most salient features. Names like Safe-n-Sound (baby car seats), Posturepedic

(mattresses), BeautyRest (mattresses), Revlon ColorStay (makeup), Head & Shoulders (shampoo), Chips Ahoy (cookies) and I Can't Believe It's Not Butter (margarine): these not only name the product but also make an implicit statement about its salient attributes. So we expect baby seats with the name 'Safe-n-Sound' to have features like quality and safety. We expect beds called 'Posturepedic' to be good for our back, and so on.

This has a very long history. 'Erik the Red named the country he had discovered Greenland, for he said that people would be more tempted to go there if it had an attractive name.'⁷ Erik the Red obviously had an intuitive feel for what influences people's expectations even though he did not think of it in terms of a product's attribute agenda.

Another example from history: before the Civil War, anything labeled alcohol had no market in the areas of the US known as temperance regions because of the social taboo. Patent medicines, on the other hand, found a big market in these regions—especially medicines containing up to 44 per cent of the preservative alcohol!⁸

Summary

How we evaluate a brand, a service or a product depends on how we perceive it. This in turn depends on the frame of reference we overlay on it. The frame of reference comes largely from our experience. Just as there is a mental agenda of brands that we associate with a given product category, so there is a mental agenda of attributes that we free-associate to a given brand.

Under normal circumstances the focal beam of our attention is only wide enough to focus on a limited number of the possible attributes of a brand or product. By shifting the spotlight and playing the focal beam of our attention on other attributes, it is possible to change our perceptions of the product. Words and images can be used to make its positive attributes more salient, to increase the probability that when we think of the brand we will think of those attributes.

Again, these may be 'feathers', but they may nevertheless be enough to tip the scales in favor of a particular brand—especially when all other factors are equal.

3 SUBLIMINAL ADVERTISING: THE BIGGEST MYTH OF ALL

*Advertising is in an odd position. Its extreme protagonists claim it has extraordinary powers and its severest critics believe them.*¹

Andrew Ehrenberg

There are those who believe that advertising is all powerful and that the mechanism of advertising must be unconscious and subliminal and this is why its effects are not open to introspection. This chapter asserts that subtlety, not subliminality, is what is important and at the same time dispels the subliminal advertising myth. I also examine the reasons why ‘embeds’ which fan people’s fears continue to appear in advertising from time to time.

The never-ending story

In 2007 during an episode of *Iron Chef America* on the cable Food Network, a single frame of the McDonald’s golden arches was discovered, embedded in a part of the program.² Why was it there? The network later explained, ‘It was a technical error on our part and not a subliminal message.’

When *The Lion King* movie was released Disney found itself under attack from accusers who said the word s-e-x could be discerned in one scene in the dust as the lions were playing. I saw the clip (before it was removed from YouTube) and there is no doubt it was in there.

Some time later in the USA, in print ads for Camel cigarettes the image of a camel was barely discernible, embedded in the patterns of exhaled smoke and in the arrangement of ice water droplets. And in a number of visual ads with no apparent message the Mercedes three-point star appeared embedded in a variety of obscure places (see the example shown below).



Figure 3.1: An ad for Camel cigarettes, where an image of a camel appeared in smoke.



Figure 3.2: Only one word, 'Speed', appeared on this ad. Note the Mercedes three-point star in the sole of the shoe.

Not surprisingly these things make consumers very uneasy. Things that we don't understand make us more fearful. The natural fear is that somehow these images are seducing us in some way without our knowledge.

Anxiety increases even more when the subliminal image is found in political communications such as happened when George W. Bush was running against Al Gore for the US presidency. A pro-Bush ad flashed the word 'Rats' subliminally just as the ad was denigrating Gore's drug prescription plan.

Rarely does anyone ever really provide a satisfactory explanation as to how these things get in there so it naturally makes people think 'Hmm . . . why is it there? Maybe I really should be afraid.'

There has been so much nonsense talked about 'subliminal advertising' that there is always a risk that writing about it will again fuel the uninformed hype. But by understanding its mythical origins we will see how subtlety, not subliminality, is what is important in advertising. The fears of subliminal effects have been grossly overblown while subtle effects that are not 'hidden' from consciousness have much more impact.

The original scare on subliminal advertising came from a marketing consultant in the USA, James Vicary, who flashed 'Drink Coca-Cola' and 'Eat popcorn' on the cinema screen during a movie so fast that nobody

was supposed to be aware it was happening. He reported that sales of Coca-Cola and popcorn increased dramatically. This caused such a scare that legislation was quickly prepared to ban subliminal advertising.

If subliminal advertising did indeed have that kind of effect on our behavior, and without our knowledge, then we clearly would need protection from it. It is still widely believed that in the 1950s, subliminal advertising was made illegal in the USA. In fact, no such legislation was passed either federally or in any state. It was banned in a number of other countries including the UK and Australia, however, but as we will see, this was unnecessary.

That was a half century ago. Ever since, there have been numerous attempts—all unsuccessful—to replicate the substantial effect claimed by Vicary and more than 200 scientific papers have been published on the subject. Pratkanis and Aronson, after exhaustively researching that literature, concluded that ‘no study has demonstrated motivational and behavioral effects similar to those claimed by the advocates of subliminal seduction’.³ It is clear, in this case, enthusiasm and myth outweighed fact.

In 1984, when confronted with the overwhelming evidence against subliminal advertising, the marketing consultant James Vicary admitted to *Advertising Age* magazine that his original claim had been a fabrication.⁴ So, subliminal advertising was just a myth all along.

Self-help tapes

If that is so, you may ask, then what about those self-help tapes? The ones that are supposed to contain subliminal messages to help you give up smoking, improve your self-esteem and so on? Are they nonsense also?

In the same way that a sugar pill will relieve pain in about a third of sufferers if they think it is aspirin, so too will such tapes work on a proportion of the people who use them—because they expect them to. Pratkanis and Aronson convincingly demonstrated this several times by giving experimental subjects tapes of classical music marked ‘subliminally improve your memory’ or ‘subliminally improve your self-esteem’. A significant proportion of the subjects reported improvements in their memory or self-esteem, depending how their tape was labeled, but the proportion was the same whether the tapes actually had subliminal messages embedded in them or not.⁵

The practical jokesters: embedded words or images

What about the images and words like 'sex' that have been shown to be embedded in some advertisements? Don't they prove that subliminal advertising is being practised and that it must be working? They prove nothing of the kind! Despite the furore and the paranoia created by such books as *Subliminal Seduction* by Wilson Bryan Key, I believe this is nothing but visual graffiti and practical joke-playing by those who design the advertising.⁶

It is similar to Hirschfeld, the cartoonist for the *New Yorker* who put his daughter's name, 'Nina', in every one of his cartoons. You really had to look for them but they were there just the same.

Most of the examples Key cited have been in print advertising. It is very easy for an art director to put something in an ad, a caricature of his boss for example, without his boss being aware that it is there. An art director friend once pointed out to me a figure in a poster he had designed and which his boss must have seen hundreds of times. There, right in the middle of the crowd scene in the poster, was a caricature of his boss. Like the Waldo character in the children's books, he was virtually invisible—until you looked. After a hearty laugh this art director swore me to silence. These things are rarely discovered. The *London Daily Mirror* once owned by the infamous Robert Maxwell ran a cartoon in which the cartoonist inserted the words 'Fuck Maxwell' in tiny letters among the squiggles.⁷

When the word 'sex' is found disguised in the shadows of ice cubes in a Gilbey's gin ad, as likely as not it is an art director having a joke on his client or his boss or just seeing if he can get away with it without anybody noticing. This kind of thing, however, gives ammunition to the conspiracy theorists who interpret words or images as proof that subliminal advertising is practised and must therefore be seducing us without our knowledge.

Why did the subliminal myth take hold?

How, if subliminal advertising is just a myth, could the myth have been perpetuated for so long?

One reason is to be found in the fact that legislators in some countries moved so quickly to ban it. In doing so they lent a kind of legitimacy to unfounded beliefs about the power of subliminal advertising. The need to prepare legislation to ban it provided history with the *prima facie* evidence that subliminal advertising is a real threat. This helped enshrine and perpetuate the myth.

Another reason is that the myth fits the image of advertising that is perpetuated by the advertising industry. As we saw in Chapter 1, people believe that advertising has much greater powers to influence us than it really does. Once we started imputing witchdoctor-like powers to ad agencies, it was a small step to believing that they had the modern equivalent: the power to persuade us subliminally.

The media have also done their bit to foster this belief. Mystique makes for good copy and greater reader interest. Subliminal advertising taps into the same mystique as TV programs like *Heroes*, *The X Files* and *Ripley's Believe It or Not*.

But is that all there is to it? Just myth, hype and mistake? No. There is another important reason why the belief in subliminal advertising has persisted for so long. It is not totally without *any* effect. A high-jumper can leap 6 feet (2 metres) but this does not mean humans can fly. There are limits to how high we can go, unassisted. Similarly, as the earlier chapters of this book have shown, we are able to learn without full, conscious awareness—but only up to a point.

There is no doubt that we can be influenced without awareness, but as the earlier chapters show there is nothing necessarily unique or evil or manipulative about this. It is a quantum leap from here to believing in wholesale manipulation of people's minds through subliminal advertising. Just because we can learn without full awareness does not mean that advertising practises mass manipulation on us. People can jump 6 feet—but flying is something else.

Claims about subconscious learning had a kernel of truth. Claims about subliminal advertising were wildly exaggerated and they distorted this truth. Advertising often works without our being able to keep track of the process. There is no need for subliminal exposures on TV and cinema screens. The process happens naturally. It is what low-involvement communication is all about.

Thirty years of research later

So let's look at the claims a half century later—in light of the substantial body of scientific research on the human brain that has accumulated since then.

The notion of subliminal advertising was based on the belief that awareness was an all-or-nothing thing. That is, we are either aware of something or we are not. This is demonstrably untrue. Research in cognitive

psychology over the past 35 years has shown that *conscious awareness is a dimension and not a dichotomy. It is a matter of degree.*

By way of illustration, let me draw your attention to the sounds around you right now. What can you hear? Were you aware of the sounds before I drew your attention to them? Probably not. The reason is a matter of degree of consciousness. You were not paying attention to the sounds but that does not mean they were 'subliminal' in the sense that they were unable to be heard.

A more useful way of thinking about this issue is in terms of depth of mental processing. Instead of subliminal we could use the terms 'peripheral', 'shallow' or 'implicit processing'.

The logic and illogic of subliminal advertising

The concept of subliminal advertising was based on the notion of a threshold. Subliminal meant 'below the limen, or threshold'. This was thought to be a fixed point below which awareness does not extend. This 'limen' was just another name for the threshold.

We know that for some sounds, dogs have a much lower threshold than humans. They can hear sounds that we can't. This is the principle behind the dog whistle.

When we have a hearing test, the loudness of a tone is gradually increased until we indicate to the doctor that we can hear it. This is the threshold at which sound enters our consciousness. The same applies to sight. If a word is flashed on a screen for 50 milliseconds we will not be aware of it. If the time of the exposure is increased, at a certain point the word crosses the threshold and enters our conscious awareness.

Subliminal advertising was supposed to be pitched just barely below the threshold of awareness. If it was too far below it would not work. The theory was that the exposure should be sufficiently long for people to register the message unconsciously but not long enough for them to become aware of it. Research has since shown that there is no absolute threshold below which we are always unconscious of something and above which we are always conscious of it. (For example, when we are hungry we recognize food words at much shorter exposures than non-food words. The threshold is lower for these words when we are hungry and higher if we have just eaten.)

Thresholds therefore turn out to vary in the same person from day to day and even from hour to hour. This is partly because sometimes we

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