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Remembering Words and Brands After a Perception of Discrepancy

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We investigated the effects on consumer memory of experiencing a perception of discrepancy during an initial encounter with a target word or target brand in an ad. Targets were presented in an exposure phase, half in a context inducing the perception of discrepancy. That experience increased the accuracy of recognition of the targets, even though the total exposure time of the target was shorter relative to equally elaborative conditions not inducing a perception of discrepancy. We concluded that a perception of discrepancy in an initial encounter with a keyword or brand in an ad is a valuable aid to memory, especially for brands.

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Remembering Words and Brands after a Perception of Discrepancy

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Online advertising has grown at a tremendous rate in the last few years. Banner advertising is the most common form of online advertising and is found on most if not all websites. Typically a panel is displayed either at the top or the bottom, or at either side, of a website, displaying various advertisements that change from time to time. One example reads “Unlimited local and long distance calling from VONAGE”, appearing for only 4 seconds. How is it then that viewers would remember VONAGE given such a short duration of exposure? Many theories of memory are based on studies that examine accuracy towards targets. More recently, marketers have begun to consider the phenomenological aspects of memory, which lead to illusions of recognition towards brands, as would be the case if a consumer would recollect “AT&T” after seeing a VONAGE ad (see Kronlund, Yoon, and Wagner 2007 for a retrospective).

We examined the consequences of experiencing what we call a “perception of discrepancy” on later interactions with the same stimuli. By this, we mean a perception of a mismatch in cognitive processing. This is why we speak of a ‘perception’ of discrepancy, rather than ‘discrepancy’ alone. The term we use is not meant to describe the stimulus (a ‘discrepant’ stimulus, such as “Starbucks” would not be expected in the example above), rather, it is meant to describe the subjective feeling of surprise, arising from some sort of uncertainty given the context. We experimentally create surprise by placing a brief pause between the stem and brand.

We employed the stem-completion method (Whittlesea and Williams 2001), whereby we presented a high constraint stem with a brief pause, and target item, during exposure. To illustrate: “unlimited local and long distance calling” was presented for 3 seconds; before presenting VONAGE, allowing a brief pause between the stem and brand. We argue that the high constraint stem causes one to develop an indefinite expectation, or a readiness to incorporate one of a restricted number of concepts (without projecting a specific target). The pause causes a fleeting sense of uncertainty (a realization that one does not know exactly what is coming). This experience causes the target, when shown, to feel surprisingly well fitting.

This type of exposure acts to increase attention towards the target, allowing it to be remembered more accurately later (experiments 1 and 2), even though the recognition test target word was shown in isolation, and so did not have an additional cue to help reinstate the encoding process. Our results add to the literature (e.g., previous work by Kronlund and Whittlesea 2006) by demonstrating that the pause effect is due to the combination of an indefinite expectation, uncertainty and surprising resolution, or what we call the “perception of discrepancy”, and the perception of discrepancy is a powerful source of learning key words and brand names in ads.

The effects of the pause caused participants to be more likely to accurately claim to have seen the brand once in experiments 1 and 2. In experiment 3 we presented brands with stems either once or repeated after viewing other brands with stems. A different process occurred in experiment 3: During the second presentation of a brand in an ad (e.g., seeing the VONAGE ad for the second time), even with a pause, the person forms a *definite* expectation of a schema for that brand category, or a specific projection of which brand is about to be shown. The pause then contributes to this learning experience by allowing the participant the opportunity to actually generate that

brand (an act that is verified by the presentation of the target brand a moment later). This act of generation allows them to realize, at the moment of generation during the second exposure presentation, that they are experiencing this brand for the second time, encoding the brand *as* a repetition, which would make it much easier to remember that brand.

Our findings introduce the notion that marketers should consider the basic cognitive processes that consumers use when reading such ads containing written sentences ending with key words (e.g., MINIVAN), or brand names (e.g., WINDSTAR). This is especially important in light of recent trends for traditional ad agencies offering “automated ad creation”: Omnicom Group offers automotive advertisers a “Pick ‘n’ Click” option to tailor their messages. A recent television spot for the Toyota Camry provides an example of an ad employing a written sentence stem to present the brand name in question. At the end of each spot of the campaign, the words “The modern family sedan” appear, and following a brief pause, the brand name “CAMRY” appears adjacent to the sentence stem. Both the stem and the brand name are presented in silence, allowing viewers of the ad to read it, to encode the brand in a way that can later be remembered. We suggest that the optimal exposure method, given only about 4 seconds, would be to present the stem, followed by a brief pause, and end with the target. These conditions lead to better memory for the target as opposed to presenting the entire message all at once. By using the results of this research, marketers should be able to tailor their marketing efforts in a fashion to better allocate marketing dollars in an era of shrinking budgets. The effectiveness of the presentation of brand names in sentences in this way, although used as a technique in advertisements, has not been examined empirically. The experiments in this article provide insights into the underlying cognitive mechanisms involved when consumers encounter such words and brands in ads, and suggest that the optimal presentation method for brands in sentences is through the use of a pause between the stem and the brand.

In summary, we investigated the effects on consumer memory of experiencing a perception of discrepancy during an original encounter with a word or brand. This experience increased the accuracy of recognition of the targets, even though the total exposure time of the target was shorter relative to the control. We conclude that a perception of discrepancy in an initial encounter with a keyword or brand in an ad is a valuable aid to memory, especially for brand names.

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