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## The Influence of Consumers' Goals on Selective Attention to Product Features

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## ABSTRACT

Although attention is a key construct in models of marketing communications and consumer choice, its selective nature has rarely been examined in the time-pressured conditions that consumers face everyday. We investigate how consumers' goals influence selective attention to product features under such conditions. Specifically, we focus on the role of *goal salience*, that is, the readiness with which particular goals (e.g., personalized customer service) are brought to mind by consumers in relation to a given product category (e.g., banks). Study 1 demonstrated that when product feature information was presented rapidly, individuals for whom the goal of personalized customer service had high chronic or habitual salience displayed selective attention in terms of their elevated recall of a target feature (a bank's "friendly employees"). Also, as expected, individual differences in chronic goal salience affected judgments of the target product. Study 2 showed that when subjects were additionally informed about a specific product usage situation (e.g., being new in town or experiencing difficulty in balancing a checkbook), selective attention was no longer affected by individuals' chronic tendencies. Instead, both feature recall and judgments were influenced by the relevance of the target feature to the goals made salient by the situational context. Discussion emphasizes the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings regarding the role of goal salience in selective attention to product features.

Each day in their harried lives consumers are bombarded by product information, from advertising to packaging to sales pitches: some they tune in, much they tune out. As a result, it is critical for marketers to understand why and how consumers selectively attend to information about *particular product features* but not others. Twenty-five years ago Haley (1971, p.8) suggested that "people are apt to look at and remember things in which they are interested rather than things in which they are not" and the way people screen product information is related to "the benefits they are seeking." In his classic example of benefit segmentation, Haley (1968) suggested that consumers desiring the benefit of decay prevention in a toothpaste might especially attend to information about the product feature fluoride, while those seeking flavor might be more attentive to features such as a minty taste.

Despite Haley's simple and compelling insight, theory and empirical research on selective attention has been scarce in the domain of marketing. Practically no studies have been done to investigate selective attention to product features in conditions where the consumer's opportunity to process information is severely limited. This research gap is unfortunate. Marketing stimuli (e.g., print ads or packaging) often furnish information about multiple product features; yet, time pressures of the kind consumers face everyday (e.g., while flipping through a magazine or hurrying down a supermarket aisle) likely compel selective attention to a small subset of features. The resulting product evaluations and choices are then often based on the few features that receive attention (Wright 1974; Wright & Weitz 1977). Hence, a thorough understanding of consumers' selective attention processes is needed to aid managers in developing communication strategies that effectively penetrate the perceptual filters of their targeted markets.

Although a complete review of past attention-related marketing research is beyond our scope here, it is worth noting that prior research on the causal determinants of attention can be classified in terms of stimulus, situational, or individual factors. Research on stimulus factors has been predominant, focusing on such tactics as naming a competitor (e.g., Pechmann and Stewart 1990), creating a picture-word incongruity (e.g., Houston, Childers, and Heckler 1987), or incorporating arousal-producing aspects such as sexuality or humor (e.g., Alexander and Judd 1978; Duncan and Nelson 1985). Research on situational factors that impact attention has mostly emphasized two different issues. First, it

has examined contextual influences such as the distraction produced by the program in which an ad is embedded (e.g., Anand and Sternthal 1992). Second, it has investigated the role of situational factors that affect short-term motivation for processing an ad (e.g., whether a brand is being introduced or not being introduced in the local market; Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983). Finally, research on individual factors that influence attention has been least frequent, typically focusing on long-term motivational tendencies. Some people by nature are simply more effortful and analytical, i.e., they have a comparatively high "need for cognition." Such individuals are more likely to attend to central product features as opposed to peripheral cues (Haugtvedt, Petty, and Cacioppo 1992). Similarly, Celsi and Olson (1988) found that people with high enduring involvement in a product category paid more attention to ads related to that category.

These cited studies are quite representative of previous marketing research in that they all pertain to the concomitant issues of attention and effort at an *overall* level. To reiterate our earlier point, empirical research in marketing has seldom dealt with the phenomena of selectivity of attention with respect to *specific* product features or its underlying theoretical explanation. Moreover, to our knowledge no controlled studies have been done to test Haley's (1971) proposition that consumers attend to product features purposefully on the basis of specific benefits they seek from the product.

In the present research, we conceptualize the benefits sought by the individual consumer as *goals* (e.g., safety in an automobile; see Huffman and Houston 1993). Goals are ends that can be fulfilled by the means afforded by specific product *features* (e.g., a car's size, body construction, seat belts, anti-lock brakes, or air bags). Our research focus is on *goal salience*, which refers to the readiness with which a goal is brought to mind or activated mentally by a consumer in relation to a given product category and in a given situation. The primary purpose of this research is to study the influence of goal salience on selective attention to product features. We first conceptualize the individual and situational factors that might affect goal salience, and the likely consequences for selective attention. We then report two studies which required subjects to make snap judgments of products when presented with feature information at a rapid rate. Selective attention was measured via a surprise recall test of product features.<sup>1</sup> Effects on product evaluative judgments are also examined. We conclude with a discussion of both the theoretical and managerial implications of our findings.

## GOAL SALIENCE AND SELECTIVE ATTENTION

Attention is an important construct in models of communication and consumer choice (e.g., Bettman 1979; Greenwald and Leavitt 1984; MacInnis and Jaworski 1989) and its selective nature is well documented, especially in psychology (James 1890; Johnston and Dark 1986; Kahneman 1973). A key aspect of selective attention is that the same objective information can be processed differently depending on the particular constructs that are mentally salient or "accessible" for the individual in a given situation. Kelly (1955), in his personality theory, suggested that the constructs (e.g., honesty or attractiveness) that develop through frequent experience with certain types of events in a person's past are likely to habitually or chronically influence the manner in which that individual attends to and extracts meaning from information about other people. Bruner (1957) referred to these constructs as "categories" and emphasized that categories recently used or those related to current needs are more likely to be accessed from memory; the accessibility (i.e., salience) of these categories determines a person's readiness to encode relevant inputs. Most contemporary social psychologists continue to stress the interaction between stimuli that are present and the individual's cognitive readiness to perceive some aspects of the stimuli and not others (Bargh 1984; Higgins and King 1981; Wyer and Srull 1986). Further, current social cognition models often combine Kelly's idea of chronic (i.e., individual-specific) constructs with Bruner's notion of temporary (i.e., situation-specific) categories by positing that their consequences are similar (see Bargh, Bond, Lombardi, and Tota 1986; Higgins 1990; Higgins, Bargh, and Lombardi 1985). *Ceteris paribus*, the more cognitively accessible or salient a construct, the more likely it will be used in the perception of new environmental information.

In the realm of marketing, an important theoretical proposition is that the salience of specific goals or decision criteria play an important role in consumer judgments and choices (e.g., Bettman and Sujan 1987; Park and Smith 1989; Wright and Rip 1980). Park and Smith (1989) refer to goal-driven decision-making as a top-down process; they contrast it with a bottom-up process wherein the decision criteria are influenced by factors such as the comparability of the alternatives in the choice set (see also Bettman and Sujan 1987). Huffman and Houston (1993) demonstrate that the goal furnished to a subject (e.g., comfort

vs. musical versatility for an electric guitar) influences information search. Nevertheless, none of these studies have examined the role of salient goals in time-pressured conditions that necessitate selective attention. Further, the effects of factors such as chronic individual differences in goal salience have not been investigated.

In the present research, we propose that both individual and situational factors can influence goal salience. Consider a goal such as healthiness in reference to evaluating snack foods on a given purchase occasion. The goal may be highly salient to individual X because the person has chronically (and frequently) accessed the same goal on similar past occasions. For individual Y, on the other hand, this goal simply might not be salient because this person has not habitually brought it to mind on similar occasions in the past. Such individual differences in chronic goal salience can arise on account of differences in higher-order goals such as a person's life themes and terminal values (Mick and Buhl 1992; Reynolds and Gutman 1988).

In addition to individual sources of variability in goal salience, situational influences need to be considered. A considerable amount of prior consumer research has documented that product usage situations play a major explanatory role in consumer preferences and choices (see, e.g., Belk 1975; Dickson 1982; Srivastava, Alpert, and Shocker 1984). Knowledge of the product usage context helps the consumer to frame and define specific goals that are relevant to the intended product usage (Ratneshwar and Shocker 1991). Thus, while favorable health consequences may not have been a salient goal to individual Y in the past, the situational context of being on a diet might temporarily activate the goal in relation to snack foods.

In sum, both individual and situational sources of variability in goal salience are important and need to be considered. A highly salient goal should serve as a cognitive "tuning" mechanism for the consumer when selective attention is necessitated (cf. Haley 1971). Hence, on the basis of the literature discussed earlier, we expect that whenever there is a potential for information overload, consumers should selectively attend to those product features that map on to individual and/or situational goals that are currently salient (see also Bargh and Thein 1985). Further, if a feature is positively valenced, it should have a more favorable effect on judgments of a product when that feature is related to a highly salient goal. Hence, we predict that when coping with product information in the harried manner that is



characteristic of many consumer behavior environments, goal salience should affect subsequent recall of a relevant product feature as well as evaluative judgments of the product.

## STUDY 1

The first experiment constituted a direct test of Haley's key assertion that consumers purposefully attend to goal-relevant features. Specifically, it focused on the role of chronic goal salience as a causal factor in such attentional selection.<sup>2</sup> We predicted that when subjects are presented product feature information rapidly, chronic goal salience should influence the attention paid to a target feature that pertains to the goal. Consequently, "high chronics" for such a target feature should demonstrate better recall of the target feature and rate the target product more favorably, given that the feature is positively valenced.

### Method

*Subjects and Design.* Subjects were 117 undergraduate marketing students who participated in small groups (median  $n=10$ ) for extra course credit. The target product selected for the study was *a bank*, a category familiar to our student subjects, given that virtually all had at least one local bank account. We chose the target goal to be *personalized customer service*. This choice was based on pilot studies that suggested considerable inter-individual differences in the salience of this goal among our subject population. The study itself was conducted in two ostensibly unrelated sessions. In the first session a top-of-the-mind elicitation task was used to measure chronic salience of the target goal. The second session, conducted two weeks later, was devoted to the product judgment task.

*First Session Procedure.* We measured the chronic salience of the target goal to individuals by adapting an elicitation method used in social cognition studies (see, e.g., Higgins, King, and Mavin 1982). Three different product categories were used. For each category, subjects were given four separate tasks, namely, they were asked to list product attributes or characteristics that came to mind when they thought about the type of product in a given category (e.g., banks) that they *liked*, *disliked*, *sought*, and *avoided*. The order of presentation of the three product categories was rotated systematically so that subjects had to elicit attributes for two filler products (apartments, stereo systems) in between tasks

related to banks (the target product category). The filler products helped to clear previously-listed attributes from working memory and to disguise the actual target product.

Subjects were informed that there were no right or wrong answers and that they had to simply record the attributes or characteristics in the order in which these occurred to them. Subjects were provided with a stack of blank 3" x 5" cards to record their responses. Each attribute was written on a fresh card which was then turned over and kept face down. Subjects were told to number the cards so as to facilitate our coding of the order in which attributes were listed for each task. They were also instructed not to look back at the cards on which they had already written. Upon completion, subjects filled out the 18-item "need for cognition" scale developed by Cacioppo, Petty, and Kao (1984) and were then dismissed. We measured need for cognition in order to include it as a covariate in the analyses to control for individual differences in task motivation.

Subjects' cards for the four tasks related to *banks* were scrutinized by a judge who coded their responses in terms of whether or not the listed attributes were related to the target goal, namely, personalized customer service. A chronic goal salience score was then created for each subject as follows. We took into account the frequency as well as the primacy with which relevant attributes were listed, since both are potential indicators of top-of-the-mind salience. For each task, only the first five cards were counted. A related attribute (e.g., "they treat you nicely" or "rude tellers") mentioned on the first card was given a score of 5. If a related attribute did not appear on any of the first four cards but appeared on the fifth card, it was scored an 1. Related attributes listed on the cards in between were scored proportionately. (There was no double-counting if several related attributes were mentioned within the same orienting task.) If no related attributes were produced on any of the first five cards for the task, it was scored as 0. Finally, each subject's scores were summed across the four tasks to create the individual-level measure of chronic goal salience (range: 0 to 20). A second judge independently coded a randomly selected 33% of subjects' cards. Interjudge reliability with regard to subjects' chronic goal salience scores was high ( $r = .93$ ).

*Second Session Procedure.* Subjects were informed that they would be asked for their impressions of products on the basis of product features that would be presented to them on a screen by an overhead projector, and that the researchers were interested in "simulating real life conditions where

people are often exposed to product information for only a brief period of time--for example, during a TV commercial or when glancing at an ad while flipping the pages of a magazine." Correspondingly, subjects were told that they would be given only a "limited" amount of time for reading the information on the screen, after which they would record their impressions in the questionnaire.

The experiment then commenced. On eight successive trials, features of eight products were presented on the screen. Each time the experimenter ensured that all subjects were gazing at the screen by alerting them with the word "Ready?" She then initiated the program on a computer-controlled overhead projector. On each trial the name of the target product (e.g., *A Calculator, A Bank*) first appeared at the top of the screen for five seconds. Next, a list of six features was displayed below the product name for five seconds, after which the screen went blank. We opted to use a feature display-time of five seconds based on pretesting which established that this was adequate for one rapid reading of the feature list for virtually all subjects. As soon as the list of features disappeared from the screen, subjects recorded their evaluative judgments ("impressions") of the particular product. After all eight trials were over, subjects completed the other measures in the questionnaire and were debriefed.

For every product, six product features were presented simultaneously one below another and in clearly visible block letters. In the case of the target product, *a bank*, these features were described as *ample parking, founded 40 years ago, attractive landscaping, friendly employees, safety lockboxes available, and modern building*. The positively-valenced feature pertaining to the target goal was *friendly employees* (henceforth referred to as the "target feature"). The other five features were deliberately chosen based on pilot testing to be relatively nondiagnostic in their evaluative implications for our subjects.

The first trial was a filler that served to familiarize subjects with the task and the target product (bank) was presented in the second position in the block of eight trials. The succeeding six trials were also fillers, and they ensured that if the target feature did not receive much attention, it would likely be erased from memory through retroactive interference before subjects were administered the recall task. Care was taken to ensure that there were no overlaps between the target feature ("friendly employees") and the features of the filler products.

*Dependent Measures.* Subjects judged the target product by rating it on three bipolar 9-point scales (positive poles: very favorable, very positive, very likable). These items (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ )

were summed to form a composite judgment index (range: 0 to 24). After completing the judgment task, subjects rated the extent to which the task had been a pleasant experience (scale: 1 to 9). We obtained task pleasantness ratings in order to use this variable as a covariate in the analyses; we wished to control for information-processing differences caused by the negative affect possibly engendered by time-pressured tasks. Subjects then answered two questions designed to check on whether they had adequate English fluency. Next, subjects were given one minute in which to recall as many product features as possible out of those they had seen for a *bank*. (Importantly, subjects had not anticipated that their memory would be tested.) Two judges (blind to condition) scored all the recall records for accuracy of recall; interjudge agreement was 100%. Subjects then responded to a recognition task. They were presented a list of ten potential features for the target product: four old features that included the target ("friendly employees") and six new ones (e.g., "quick service"). Subjects were asked to check all the features they recognized as having seen earlier.

## Results

Subjects were divided into three groups of approximately equal size based on their chronic goal salience scores (low  $\leq 5$ , medium  $> 5$  but  $< 13$ , high  $\geq 13$ ). The main dependent variables are presented as a function of chronic goal salience in Table 1.

<Insert Table 1 about here>

*Recall of Target Product Feature.* An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on the recall of the target product feature (coded 0 or 1). In addition to the primary independent variables, subjects' need for cognition scores and task pleasantness ratings were included as covariates in the analysis. The ANOVA yielded a significant main effect for chronic goal salience,  $F(2, 111) = 7.42$  ( $p < .001$ ; see Table 1, row 1 for covariate-adjusted proportions for each condition). As predicted, subjects with high (vs. low) chronic goal salience performed significantly better in correctly recalling the target feature (93% vs. 57%,  $p < .001$ ). Need for cognition proved to be marginally significant ( $p < .06$ ), while task pleasantness did not have a statistically significant effect.

Since recall of the target feature is a binary variable, we checked on the reliability of the ANOVA results by conducting a logistic regression on recall using maximum-likelihood estimation. The

independent variables were the same as those in the prior ANOVA. Paralleling the ANOVA results, in this regression chronic goal salience was a significant predictor of recall,  $b = .11$  ( $p < .01$ ).

*Recall of Nontarget Product Features.* An ANOVA was conducted on the number of nontarget product features correctly recalled by subjects. The analysis did not yield any significant effects (all  $F$ s  $< 1$ ; see Table 1, row 2). Thus, when considered together, the results for the recall of target and nontarget features are consistent with our selective attention hypothesis for chronic goal salience. Individuals with high (vs. low) chronic goal salience displayed better recall of only the target and not the nontarget features, given that only the target feature pertains to the goal. We sought more direct evidence for this hypothesized interaction by conducting a MANOVA in which we included both target and nontarget recall as within-subject dependent variables. This analysis confirmed a significant interaction between chronic goal salience and target/nontarget recall, Wilks' Lambda  $F(2, 111) = 8.80$  ( $p < .001$ ).

*Recognition of Target Product Feature.* An ANOVA identical to that on recall was conducted on recognition of the target product feature (coded 0 or 1). It revealed a significant main effect for chronic goal salience,  $F(2, 111) = 4.60$  ( $p < .05$ ; see Table 1, row 3). Subjects with high (vs. low) chronic goal salience were more likely to correctly recognize the target product feature ( $p < .05$ ). In this analysis, the need for cognition covariate was marginally significant ( $p < .08$ ). A logistic regression was also conducted with the same independent variables and with recognition of the target feature as the criterion. Consistent with the ANOVA results, it revealed a marginally significant effect for chronic goal salience,  $b = .07$  ( $p = .08$ ).

*Judgments of Target Product.* An ANOVA was also conducted on subjects' judgments of the target product; here, in addition to need for cognition and task pleasantness, we included judgment scale tendency as an additional covariate. This last covariate was simply the subject's mean judgment of the seven non-target (filler) products, and we included it to control for individual differences in the use of the judgment scales. In accordance with our expectations, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for chronic goal salience,  $F(2, 110) = 7.52$  ( $p < .001$ ; see Table 1, row 4). High (vs. low) chronic goal salience subjects judged the target product significantly more favorably (19.75 vs. 15.93,  $p < .001$ ). Judgment scale tendency was the only significant covariate ( $p < .05$ ).

## Discussion

Study 1 results supported our predictions with regard to the effects of chronic goal salience on selective attention. When presented with product feature information at a very rapid rate, individuals for whom the goal of personalized customer service had high (vs. low) chronic salience displayed considerably higher levels of recall of the target feature ("friendly employees"). Importantly, this result was obtained in the context of a product judgment task in which subjects were not forewarned that they would be tested on their memory for the product features. Further, supporting a selective attention explanation, chronic goal salience did not enhance recall of *nontarget* product features. Also, as expected, subjects with higher levels of chronic goal salience made more favorable judgments of the target product, a bank, thus reflecting their pick up of information about its "friendly employees". These results were obtained after controlling for individual differences in (1) motivation for processing (as measured by the need for cognition scale) and (2) affect generated by the time-pressured task (as measured by subjects' task pleasantness ratings). Thus, it appears quite unlikely that the effects of chronic goal salience were confounded by individual differences in motivation or affect.

One other possible alternative explanation needs to be ruled out, however, with regard to the recall results. It is conceivable that individuals with high chronic goal salience, instead of paying more attention to the target feature at the point of presentation, were simply more adept at *constructing* this feature at the point of memory test because it was related to a goal that was "on top of their mind." Note such a constructive explanation implies that we should have observed the effect of chronic goal salience on recall of "friendly employees" even if the target feature had *not* been part of the stimulus information. Thus, in order to rule out this alternative explanation, we replicated the complete second-session experiment procedures with another group of subjects ( $n = 36$ ) from the same subject pool, but with one critical change in the procedure: The target feature *friendly employees* was replaced by the feature *ATM facility*. Analyses of the recall records of these latter subjects did not yield even a single instance of an item related to *friendly employees*. Thus, a constructive--rather than attentional--explanation for the recall results does not seem plausible.

## STUDY 2

Study 1 provided clear evidence that inter-individual (chronic) differences in goal salience can impact on selective attention to product features. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the aforementioned effect was observed in an experimental setting where subjects were not provided with any situational information at all prior to their exposure to product features; instead, only the product names were provided. Therefore, in study 2 we examined how individual variability in goal salience might combine with situational influences in affecting selective attention.

Prior research on consumers' judgments of products has established that the most important aspect of situational influence is the "task definition" furnished by the product usage context (Belk 1975). From a cognitive standpoint, information about the product usage context can provide constraints that help delineate the consumer's ends or goals (Ratneshwar and Shocker 1991). Consequently, we propose that when the usage situation is such as to make certain goals unambiguously salient, the individual should focus attention on product features that can be instrumental to accomplishing those context-specific goals. For example, the product usage situation "A beverage to drink upon returning home from a workout on a hot summer day" might make very salient in the consumer's mind the associated goal "refreshing" (as opposed to, say, "stimulating"). In turn, this should attune the consumer to product features (e.g., the temperature of a beverage) that are relevant to the goal made salient by the usage context.

But what should be the joint effects of chronic and situational goal salience? One possibility is that these two factors should produce additive effects with regard to attention to product features. Indeed, contemporary models of person perception in the field of social cognition suggest that salience is a simple, additive outcome of individual and situational sources of variability (see Bargh et al. 1986; Higgins 1990). Nonetheless, at least with regard to product perceptions, a second possibility is that situational goal salience might dominate. Past research has demonstrated that product usage context can overshadow individual differences in terms of variance explained in consumers' preferences (see Belk 1975; Ratneshwar and Shocker 1991; Srivastava, Alpert, and Shocker 1984). To the extent that people adapt their goals in a flexible manner to the constraints imposed by the usage context, situational influences might rule over chronic tendencies. If so, situational goal salience rather than chronic goal salience should play the major role in guiding attention to product features. Study 2 examined these

alternative possibilities in an experimental setting where subjects were provided with descriptions of the product usage situation prior to exposure to product feature information.

### **Method**

*Subjects and Design.* Subjects were 100 undergraduate marketing students who participated in small groups for extra course credit. We utilized the same target product (a bank), and target goal ("personalized customer service") as in study 1. In the first of two ostensibly unrelated sessions, an elicitation task identical to the one in study 1 was used to measure chronic goal salience. The second session, held two weeks later, involved the product judgment and feature recall and recognition tasks; in this session, subjects were assigned randomly to one of three situational goal salience conditions.

In the high situational goal salience condition, the description of the product usage situation was designed to make the target goal very salient; in the low situational goal salience condition, we manipulated the usage situation so as to minimize the salience of personalized customer service. In a third (control) condition, the usage context was neutral and quite nondescript in its goal implications (see below).

*Second Session Procedure.* Subjects were informed that we were interested in their impressions of particular products (e.g., "a tennis racket") in the context of certain situations (e.g., "buying a birthday present for a 12-year old boy"). They were told that it was very important for them to imagine themselves in those situations. The rest of the cover story was virtually identical to that of study 1 and it included an advance intimation to subjects that they would be given only a limited amount of time for reading the product features on the screen, following which they would be recording their impressions in the questionnaire.

On each of the eight trials subjects first read a description of the product usage situation that was given at the top of the page in the questionnaire. They did this twice, since we wished to ensure that they grasped the usage context conveyed by the situational information. Each situation description first identified the product and then presented a vignette of approximately 70 words. Once the subjects had finished reading a situation description, the experimenter directed their attention to the screen and initiated the presentation of product feature information. The format, content, and timing of the feature information display on each trial was identical to that of study 1. Subjects recorded their judgments of the products



after each 5-second feature information display. At the end of the eight trials, they responded to the other dependent measures just as in study 1.

*Manipulation of Situational Goal Salience.* Subjects in the high situational goal salience condition were provided a usage context that was designed to make very salient the goal of personalized customer service:

*You have a new job in a town where you don't know anyone yet. You need to open an account in a bank where you can regularly go to deposit your salary checks. You also need to pick up rolls of quarters regularly. In the past you have needed help in balancing your checkbook, and you don't consider yourself an expert in financial matters. You are thinking about buying a house in the near future, and you need assistance in considering the various financing options that are available.*

Subjects in the low situational goal salience condition were provided a usage context that minimized the salience of personalized customer service and accentuated instead alternative goals such as remote (electronic) access to bank accounts and convenience in withdrawing cash:

*You have a new job in a big city where you have been living in recent years. You need to open an account in a bank where your employer can directly deposit your salary through computer transfer funds. You also need to move money regularly between your checking and saving accounts. In the past, you have kept very good records of your bank transactions, and you are fairly confident in your understanding of financial matters. Your job requires considerable overnight travel, so you will frequently need cash from your account to pay for travel expenses.*

Subjects in the neutral situational goal salience condition were provided a nondescript usage context that did not make any particular goal salient. Given the absence of any strong situational constraints, we expected that in this condition, at least, chronic goal salience would still influence selective attention:

*You have a new job in a town where you have been living in recent years. You need to open an account in a bank where your salary can be deposited. You wish to open both a checking and a savings account. In the past, the monthly balance statements have usually enabled you to keep*

*track of your bank transactions, and you have a reasonable understanding of financial matters.*

*You will need to go into the bank about once a month.*

A manipulation check was conducted in a pretest to ensure that (1) the three usage situation conditions produced differential salience of the target goal, and that (2) the neutral condition was one that did not impose any particular usage goal, thus ensuring that the salience of the target goal would be driven primarily by chronic goal salience. In this pretest, chronic salience of the goal “personalized service” was assessed in a group of 90 subjects. They returned two weeks later for an ostensibly unrelated study. In this second session, they were randomly assigned to one of the three situational goal salience conditions and were instructed to read the corresponding usage situation description. They were asked to think of the type of bank they would seek out in the particular situation and to list the bank’s characteristics or attributes (no more than five) in the order in which these characteristics came to mind. Confirming our expectations, a significantly higher proportion of the high (vs. low) situational goal salience subjects listed one or more characteristics that related to personalized customer service (79% vs. 25%,  $p < .001$ ); in the neutral condition, 42% of the subjects did so. In addition, the data in the high situational goal salience condition showed very little correlation between subjects’ normalized chronic goal salience scores (based on the data from the first session) and whether or not they listed attributes pertinent to the target goal when provided usage situation information in the second session ( $r = -.09$ ,  $p > .89$ ). In the low situational goal salience condition, this correlation was higher, but again not statistically significant ( $r = .27$ ,  $p > .22$ ). In contrast, as we had anticipated, the correlation between chronic goal salience and accessibility of the target goal was quite strong in the neutral situational goal salience condition ( $r = .54$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The data from the pretest therefore confirmed that the usage situation manipulation produced differential salience of the target goal, and that the neutral condition was indeed one that did not impose strong situational constraints on the cognitive accessibility of the target goal.

## Results

Subjects were divided into three groups of approximately equal size based on their chronic goal salience scores, just as in study 1. The major dependent variables are presented as a function of both chronic and situational goal salience in Table 2.

<Insert Table 2 about here>

*Recall of Target Product Feature.* A 3 (chronic goal salience) X 3 (situational goal salience) ANOVA was conducted along with follow-up contrasts of means. Need for cognition and task pleasantness ratings were introduced as covariates. The overall main effect of situational goal salience was only marginally significant ( $F(2, 89) = 2.08, p < .12$ ). More importantly, however, subjects in the high situational goal salience condition displayed higher levels of correct recall of the target feature, *friendly employees*, than did subjects in the low situational goal salience condition,  $F(1, 89) = 4.15 (p < .05; \text{cell proportions } 83\% \text{ vs. } 60\%)$ . Recall of the target feature in the neutral situational goal salience condition, not surprisingly, was found to be about midway between the high and the low conditions, although not significantly different from either (see Table 2, row 1). Chronic goal salience, in contrast, had no significant effects on recall and the interaction between situational and chronic goal salience was also not significant ( $p$ 's  $> .57$ ). As for the covariates, need for cognition was marginally significant ( $p = .07$ ) but task pleasantness was not ( $p > .89$ ). A logistic regression on recall with the same independent variables yielded the same pattern of results as the ANOVA; the likelihood of recalling the target attribute was significantly higher in the high (vs. low) situational goal salience condition ( $p < .05$ ). Neither differed significantly from the neutral condition. Once again, chronic goal salience had no significant effects on recall.

*Recall of Nontarget Product Features.* A 3 (chronic goal salience) X 3 (situational goal salience) ANOVA with need for cognition and task pleasantness as covariates revealed a significant main effect for situational goal salience,  $F(2, 89) = 3.34 (p < .05)$ . Follow-up comparisons showed that both the high and low situational goal salience conditions evidenced lower levels of correct recall of nontarget product features than in the neutral condition ( $p$ 's  $< .05$ ; see Table 2, row 2). Chronic goal salience did not have a significant impact on recall of nontarget features ( $p > .80$ ).

As in study 1, we also conducted a MANOVA in which we included both target and nontarget recall as within-subject dependent variables. The MANOVA confirmed a weak interaction between situational goal salience and target/nontarget feature recall, Wilks' Lambda  $F(2, 89) = 2.17, p < .13$ . Consistent with the idea of selective attention, relative to the neutral condition, high situational goal salience increased recall of the target feature but decreased recall of nontarget features  $F(1, 89) = 3.15, p < .08$ ).

*Recognition of Target Product Feature.* An ANOVA identical to those on the recall measures was conducted on recognition of the target feature. Somewhat surprisingly, situational goal salience did not affect recognition ( $p > .79$ ), but chronic goal salience did ( $F(2, 89) = 3.74, p < .03$ ). Individuals with high chronic goal salience recognized the target feature significantly better than their low and neutral counterparts ( $p$ 's  $< .05$ ; see Table 2, row 3). The interaction between the two types of goal salience, again, was not significant ( $p > .86$ ).

*Judgments of Target Product.* As in study 1, judgments were subjected to a 3 (chronic goal salience) X 3 (situational goal salience) ANOVA with need for cognition, task pleasantness, and judgment scale tendency as covariates. The overall main effect of situational goal salience was significant ( $F(2, 89) = 17.25, p < .001$ ). Confirming our expectations, high situational goal salience resulted in more favorable product judgments than low situational goal salience,  $F(1, 89) = 27.66 (p < .001; see Table 2, row 4)$ . Subjects in the neutral (vs. low) situational goal condition also rated the bank more favorably ( $F(1, 89) = 23.33, p < 0.001$ ). Judgments were not significantly affected by chronic goal salience ( $p > .78$ ), nor by the interaction between both types of salience ( $p > .54$ ). The only significant covariate was judgment scale tendency ( $p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

In study 2, unlike study 1, we provided descriptions of the product usage situation prior to subjects' exposure to product feature information. Further, we manipulated situational goal salience via these usage contexts. We found that recall of the target feature *friendly employees* was significantly higher and judgments were more favorable when, prior to being exposed to the feature information, subjects were provided a usage context for a *bank* that implicitly made salient the goal of personalized

customer service. These results confirm the hypothesis that selective attention to product features is sensitive to goals engendered by situational factors.

The results also attested to the capacity-limited nature of attentional processes: Subjects in both the high and the low situational goal salience conditions paid less attention than those in the neutral condition to nontarget features. Subjects in the low situational goal salience condition, just like those in the high salience condition, probably focused their attention on feature information that could be relevant to their situation-specific goals (e.g., convenient cash withdrawals). Given that the target product did not have such features, low situational goal salience subjects produced less favorable product judgments; however, like the high situational goal salience subjects, these subjects also lacked the attentional resources to process much other information about the target product.

In contrast to the results obtained in study 1, chronic goal salience did not significantly affect recall of the target feature. The constraints imposed by the usage context presumably dominated subjects' thoughts. Consequently, when the situational salience of personalized customer service was low, even individuals for whom this goal otherwise had high chronic salience probably did not bring it to mind. But, rather surprisingly, even in the neutral situational goal salience condition we did not find any effects for chronic goal salience on recall; we comment on this later in the general discussion. Nevertheless, some aspects of the data do suggest that chronic goal salience is not inconsequential when strong situational constraints are present. Note that high chronic goal salience subjects were more likely to recognize the critical feature *friendly employees* in a later recognition test than medium- and low-chronics. The implications for this apparent dissociation of recall and recognition measures are discussed in the next section.

## SUMMARY AND GENERAL DISCUSSION

How do consumers deal with the barrage of complex product information directed at them everyday? Several authors have suggested in the past that consumers are not passive targets of marketing stimuli (e.g., Bauer and Greyser 1969), and that they selectively attend to product features based on the benefits they seek (Haley 1968, 1971). Similarly, today's consumer researchers also postulate that attention to product information is influenced by purposeful factors related to the individual or the situation at hand (see, e.g., Peter and Olson 1993). These propositions regarding selective

attention appear to have considerable significance for marketers, particularly in relation to the information overload conditions that consumers face much of the time. Yet, there have been very few efforts in the past to conduct controlled studies that empirically test the individual and situational factors that govern selective attention.

The main purpose of our research was to contribute to a theoretically sound and managerially useful understanding of selective attention to product feature information. We argued that when the opportunity to process information is limited, the product features receiving selective attention are determined (at least in part) by the goals that are currently salient in an individual's mind. We operationalized goal salience on the basis of the readiness with which subjects brought to mind a target goal (personalized customer service at a bank). We examined in two studies both individual and situational sources of goal salience and their relative effects on selective attention when product feature information is presented rapidly.

Study 1 showed that individuals with high (vs. low) chronic goal salience displayed considerably higher recall of a relevant product feature (a bank's "friendly employees"). The same relationship was also observed between chronic goal salience and evaluative judgments of the product (bank). Notably, these results were obtained in a task wherein subjects were merely oriented to make snap judgments of products; they were not forewarned that their memory would be tested and their recall of feature information was not based on intentional learning. Further, with the help of a follow-up study, we were able to rule out the alternative explanation that the recall results were due to construction rather than selective attention.

Study 2 on the other hand showed that chronic goal salience is not always a significant factor in guiding the selective filtering of product information. When subjects were provided descriptions of product usage situations just prior to their exposure to product feature information, chronic goal salience mostly failed to affect selective attention. Instead, recall of the feature *friendly employees* was significantly higher and evaluations of the bank were more positive when subjects faced the evaluation task given a usage context with elements (e.g., difficulty in balancing checkbook, the purchase of a new home) that made salient the goal of personalized customer service. Correspondingly, recall of the target feature was lower

and judgments were relatively unfavorable when the usage situation focused attention toward alternative goals such as convenient cash withdrawals.

Apparently, our study 2 subjects readily adapted their goals to fit situational constraints and consequently their attention was no longer governed by factors at the individual level. Chronic goal salience failed to have an impact even in the nondescript, neutral situation condition. This suggests that even the mere presence of salient extrinsic information might cause consumers to adopt a mind-set that limits access to internal goals, including those presumed to be chronically salient. The current findings therefore do not support the conceptualization of individual and situational sources of goal salience as additive influences on selective attention (cf. Bargh et al. 1986; Higgins 1990). Future research might fruitfully examine the value of an alternative model where personal and situational factors in fact compete against each other for goal salience.

We did not anticipate the seeming dissociation between the recall and recognition measures in Study 2. Apparently, chronic goal salience did influence encoding of the target feature, but only to the extent that it would show in the more sensitive of our two dependent measures. It is however important to note that in both studies product judgments were driven by what could be recalled rather than by what could be recognized. This finding is consistent with the general idea that product judgment is driven by the subset of total information that is currently most salient (or accessible) rather than by the totality of the information that is potentially available in memory (see Alba, Hutchinson, and Lynch 1991).

To summarize, our studies showed that (1) goal salience significantly influences selective attention to product features and (2) goal salience itself is a function of chronic individual differences as well as situational factors such as the goals framed by product usage context. Taken together, our studies suggest that, during rapid information processing, if situational factors do not strongly constrain a person's attention, the preexisting goals that the individual is apt to access on a habitual (and possibly frequent) basis will guide selective attention to product features (study 1). However, if situational factors orient attention toward product features relevant for achieving contextual goals, then the impact of chronic individual differences in goal salience will be considerably diminished (study 2).

In a prior investigation, Huffman and Houston (1993) demonstrated that subjects prefer to obtain and learn goal-relevant information when they are explicitly asked to choose the specific features on which

they would like more information about a product and they are given substantial time to make such choices. In conceptual terms, their research examined the effects of consumer goals on the more deliberate and premeditated processes involved in information search. In contrast, the present results were obtained in a task wherein subjects were asked to form snap judgments of products in a highly time-constrained manner, one that necessitated spontaneous filtering of the available feature information (cf. Wright 1974). Thus, a distinctive contribution of our research is that it addresses the influence of salient goals on the reflexive aspects of selective attention, a process that is necessitated whenever consumers face potential information overload.

Several limitations of our research require acknowledgment. Only one product class and a single goal were examined. For the sake of generalizability, other product classes and goals need to be investigated. Further, our results should not be interpreted to indicate that chronic individual sources of goal salience are almost always overridden by situational sources whenever product usage goals are salient. The product category we used, bank services, was relatively mundane and not very involving in terms of salient personal concerns. Future research could test whether the balance of individual and situational influence is moderated by degree of involvement in the product category. Another factor worth noting is that we experimentally manipulated product usage situations; thus, the usage situation for a particular product was a "given" as far as subjects were concerned. Outside of laboratory contexts, however, consumers usually tend to expose themselves selectively to those life situations that are consistent with their chronically salient concerns. While it may be a general rule that consumer information processing that is situated in place and time may be primarily driven by the immediate context, the dominant role of chronically salient goals may well be in self-selection of the context itself. Again, more research on this supposition would be quite valuable.

Even though the present research concentrated on theory-testing aspects and we did not use marketing stimuli such as ads, the results suggest some interesting implications for advertising and marketing. Haley (1971), in connection with his advocacy of benefit segmentation, opined that consumers use perceptual screens to effectively block out vast amounts of advertising. Haley argued that to penetrate this attentional barrier, advertisers should rely less on devices such as exotic locales and humor and instead center their creative efforts on product benefit information relevant to the targeted segment.



Haley (1971) implied that consumers in the segment of interest (but not necessarily other segments or the aggregate market) might selectively attend to the product information in such advertising. Haley relied on case studies to indirectly substantiate his arguments and did not report any direct tests of his hypothesis. Nevertheless, the systematic individual differences in recall in study 1 lend empirical support to his suggestions; further, the notion of chronic goal salience provides a useful theoretical underpinning to the prediction of between-segment differences in the extent of processing and memorability of advertising content. In addition, the results of study 2 appear to speak to the value of marketing communications that position a product for a particular usage situation (Dickson 1982; Ratneshwar and Shocker 1991; Srivastava et al. 1984; Wansink 1994). For example, marketers of niche brands (e.g., a gourmet dessert) might embed their ads in "slice of life" situations (e.g., one where important guests are expected for dinner) that direct the consumer's attention toward relevant features (e.g., the dessert's appearance and rich taste) and away from other features (e.g., price and fat content) that might be normally salient to the health-conscious consumer (also see Wright and Rip 1980).

In conclusion, the concept of attention has played a ubiquitous and prepotent explanatory role in models of marketing communications and consumer choice. But when it has been investigated empirically, past emphasis has tended to be on stimulus and task-related factors that impact overall attention. In contrast, our focus on the readiness and goal-motivated aspects of selective attention coheres not only with the classic work of Haley (1968, 1971) but also with recent consumer research that examines the meaning of product information in terms of how the individual consumer and/or the ongoing context determine it (e.g., Huffman and Houston 1993; Mick and Buhl 1992; Ratneshwar and Shocker 1991). The significance of marketing stimuli to the consumer is a function of both the person and the situation; as Higgins (1990) points out, interactionism is not a new idea, but it is an idea whose time has come. We believe that the why and how of selective attention will be most fruitfully addressed by focusing more closely on who, where, and when.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Researchers tend to approach attention as either an independent or dependent (outcome) variable; we take the latter approach here (see also Johnston and Dark 1986). Attention may be assessed in a variety of ways; physiological assessments (e.g., brain activity or eye-tracking measures), "looking" time, and measures of stimulus memory (e.g., recall) are commonly used.
2. The experiment procedures for Study 1 also included an unobtrusive priming manipulation of the target goal; we had originally intended to study the effects of chronic goal salience in combination with priming. However, the data showed no effects at all for the priming variable on any of the dependent variables ( $p$ 's > .15). Hence, our report on this experiment refers only to the effects of chronic goal salience.
3. While the cell proportions and means reported in both tables are adjusted for covariates, the unadjusted values displayed a similar pattern for all dependent variables in both studies.

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TABLE 1

STUDY 1: ATTENTION AND JUDGMENT AS A FUNCTION OF CHRONIC GOAL SALIENCE

	Chronic Goal Salience		
	Low (n=41)	Medium (n=42)	High (n=34)
Recall of Target Product Feature	57%	61%	93%
Recall of Nontarget Product Features	44%	44%	38%
Recognition of Target Product Feature	78%	71%	97%
Product Judgment	15.93	18.04	19.75

Note: Higher numbers indicate higher proportions of subjects correctly recalling the particular product features and more favorable product judgments (possible range: 0 to 24). Chronic goal salience groups were created on the basis of individual's first-session scores: low  $\leq 5$ , medium  $> 5$  and  $< 13$ , and high  $\geq 13$ . Cell proportions and means are adjusted for covariates (see text for details).

**TABLE 2**  
**STUDY 2: ATTENTION AND JUDGMENTS AS A FUNCTION OF CHRONIC AND SITUATIONAL**  
**GOAL SALIENCE**

	Chronic Goal Salience			Situational Goal Salience		
	Low	Neutral	High	Low	Neutral	High
	(n=37)	(n=33)	(n=30)	(n=34)	(n=34)	(n=32)
Recall of Target	67%	69%	79%	60%	71%	83%
Product Feature						
Average Recall of						
Nontarget Product	31%	31%	32%	28%	38%	28%
Features						
Recognition of Target	76%	77%	98%	81%	86%	84%
Product Feature						
Product Judgment	11.91	12.24	12.85	7.77	14.26	14.97

Note: Higher numbers indicate higher proportions of subjects correctly recalling the particular product features and more favorable product judgments (possible range: 0 to 24). Chronic goal salience groups were created on the basis of individual's first-session scores: low  $\leq 5$ , medium  $>5$  and  $<13$ , and high  $\geq 13$ . Cell proportions and means are adjusted for covariates (see text for details).

