

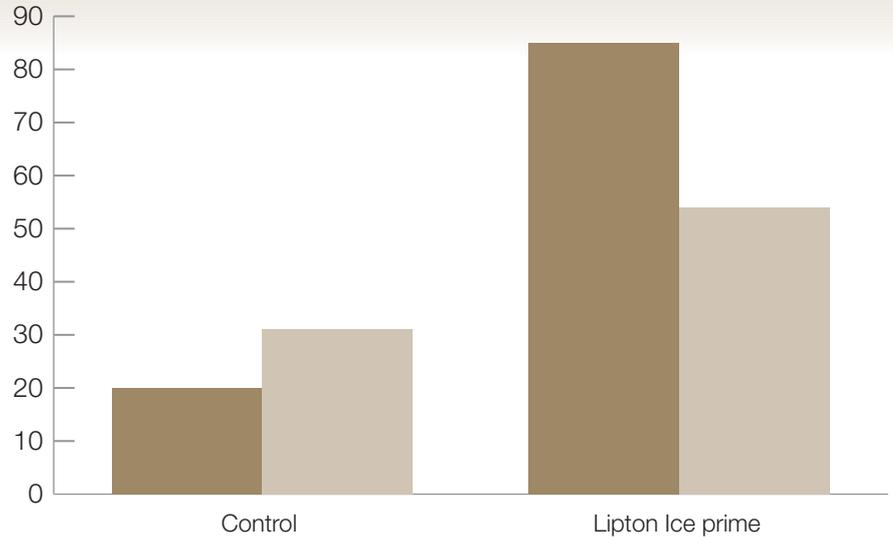




Subliminal advertising, have I lost the plot? Surely the one thing everyone knows about subliminal advertising is that it doesn't work - it was just a 1950s scare story<sup>1</sup>. When a market researcher claimed that he could get cinema audiences to "drink Coca-Cola" or "eat popcorn" with subliminal messages there was a public outcry and rushed legislation to make sub-second advertising illegal. But it soon emerged that his findings were, to put it bluntly, made up. Later studies, not surprisingly, failed to replicate his fictional results and we came to see the whole affair as an amusing footnote from a more innocent age.

**Priming and brand preference**

The problem is that it does work, sort of. A new study by Dutch psychologists<sup>2</sup> suggests that subliminally processed messages can have an impact on brand preference. Simple messages can make thirsty people favour a particular brand of drink (somewhat surreally the brand tested was Lipton Ice). The thirstier subjects are, the more powerful the effect is. In other words a subliminal ad can't make you buy a drink if you're not thirsty, but if you are it can persuade you to opt for Coke instead of Pepsi, or in the words of the lead researcher: *"Priming only works when the prime is goal-relevant"*. The results are powerful - in the thirsty group over 80% of those primed with the words "Lipton Ice" said they would have chosen Lipton Ice, against only 20% of



those in the control group.

All this is very interesting, as well as slightly frightening, and it's not just cinemas where it could work. The authors mention the possibility of subliminal adverts for Apple in computer stores, and in principle a retail environment should be perfect. But hold off on developing your own subliminal campaigns for the time being. Though the effect was quite strong, these findings are based on two laboratory studies, and psychology experiments are notoriously bad at surviving the transition from the lab to the real world.

The authors freely admit to limitations in their study: no actual choice was made (i.e. there were no tangible drinks for the

participants to select) and it is not clear how long the effect would last. Moreover the subliminal message must be very, very simple - no more than a brand name or an image. Even "eat popcorn" is probably too complex to work. Finally the prime pushing us one way or another can only sway choice, not convince us to buy something in the first place.

In reality it is unlikely that these intriguing findings will ever make their way out of the lab. As psychologist Matt Webb puts it:

“TO BE HONEST, SUBLIMINAL ADVERTISING DOESN'T SEEM WORTH THE EFFORT FOR SUCH A SMALL EFFECT. GIVEN THAT PRETTY, BARELY CLOTHED PEOPLE DOING SUGGESTIVE THINGS ON TV SELL PRODUCTS SO WELL, I DON'T SEE A SHIFT TO SUB-SECOND COMMERCIAL BREAKS ANY TIME SOON<sup>3</sup>.”

**Priming**

Priming is a reasonably well-understood process. Put briefly it means that a stimulus which activates parts of your brain triggers off activation in related parts of your brain. An easy example is this - read through the first column of words and then complete the unfinished word, then do the same with the second column.

- |        |           |
|--------|-----------|
| Red    | Plum      |
| Blue   | Nectarine |
| Orange | Pear      |
| Yellow | Apple     |
| Gr___  | Gr___     |

My bet is you opted for "green" first time round and then "grape". No I'm not Derren Brown (although many of his tricks do make use of priming!). I just got you thinking along the right lines, activating associations in your brain that would make it more likely that you'd finish gr\_\_\_ in a particular way.



**The customer experience**

More important than specific messages is the idea that tiny details (or *cues*) in the environment can have a significant unconscious effect on customers. The Total Customer Experience embraces this notion that customers pick up on all sorts of clues when they form their impressions of a supplier. The most important of these will be captured by conventional satisfaction and brand measurement techniques, but some are very subtle and somewhat surprising. *Brand Sense*<sup>4</sup> revealed that overlooked details such as the fragrance of a new car can have a powerful impact on customer perceptions. Managing these minute cues will increasingly be part and parcel of dealing with customers, and a valuable source of differentiation.

In *How Customers Think*<sup>5</sup> Gerald Zaltman elaborates on this point with some strikingly familiar turns of phrase. Discussing the role of environmental cues in triggering associations he notes: "...consumers' goals or purposes ... influence which cues people notice, and therefore which engrams become activated in their minds" - again cues must be goal-relevant to be effective. This is a reminder that, whenever you're dealing with people, you never have total control over a situation. Customers bring their own agenda with them. We have to look at all aspects of the relationship from the customer's perspective, considering what they want from each interaction. We need to design experiences so that they reflect those needs whether tangible or intangible, functional or symbolic. All environmental cues should reinforce our commitment to meeting those needs.

Zaltman gives an example of this kind of "experience engineering" at the Emergency Services Department of University Hospital in Georgia. The hospital redesigned its environment focusing on "...connecting patients and their families with the hospital in a more reassuring and empathetic way". Among the (over 100) cues used were:

- Rearranging the furniture into small circles around tables rather than rows (rows were seen as a negative cue associated with "waiting")
- Transforming the stern security guard behind a desk into a roving "greeter" helping patients through the registration process
- User-friendly language was used (e.g. "Triage station" becomes "Care Point 1 - Reception")

These and other changes, eliminating negative cues and introducing positive ones, led within a month to a one third decline in complaints and a 13% increase in "quality of care" rating.

**Final thought - don't try to run before you can walk**

You may have noticed that Barclays is currently trying something along these lines to make banking seem friendlier and less authoritarian - ATMs have become "holes in the wall", pens have been liberated from their chains and cheerfully invite you to pocket them. Perhaps we are seeing the birth of experience-engineered banking? Or perhaps it's just window-dressing - all the chain-free pens in the world won't help if your local branch has run out of paying-in envelopes, as mine did the other week.

Micro-managing the unconscious cues in the customer experience is all very well, but when businesses are still failing to get the basics right on a regular basis there's a very real danger that you're simply rearranging deckchairs on the Titanic. **S**



<sup>1</sup> The full story is well outlined at: <http://www.snopes.com/business/hidde n/popcorn.asp>

<sup>2</sup> Karremans, J.C., Stroebe, W. & Claus, J. (2006) *Beyond Vicary's fantasies: The impact of subliminal priming and brand choice*, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 2006

<sup>3</sup> Stafford, T. & Webb, M. (2005) *Mind Hacks*, O'Reilly, Sebastopol CA

<sup>4</sup> Martin Lindstrom, (February 2005). *Brand Sense*. Kogan Page

<sup>5</sup> Zaltman, G. (2003) *How Customers Think*, HBS Press, Boston



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