

Brains and walls: The power of priming

Just as surfaces accept a new coat of paint more easily once they have been primed, our brains behave in much the same way when pre-exposed to certain cues. For example, seeing priming words that relate to intelligence, actually make people perform better at Trivial Pursuit (temporarily). The interesting thing about priming is that we are generally unaware of it.

 By Sid Peimer ^{26 Feb 2006}

Music played in a store, does affect the time consumers spend in it. In a European retail study, shoppers reported no significant difference in time spent in three stores: no music; music to decrease shopping time; music to increase shopping time. However, shoppers' actual time differed significantly in each store. Furthermore, although they could perceive the presence of background music in the store, few could recall the style. So, the decision to stay or go happened unconsciously.

Gerald Zaltman, in *How Customers Think*, described a fascinating test incorporating priming and our stereotypical response to older people. Two groups of words were presented to participants, who needed to unscramble them.

Group 1
aFlodri
sWie
goBin
Group 2
tyThisr
anCle
Prteiva

After they had done the test, the participants were timed as they walked away. Those that received Group 1 primes walked significantly slower than those who received Group 2. Why? Because the first group of words primed the participants with an elderly stereotype (Florida, Wise, Bingo), whereas the second group are neutral concepts (Thirsty, Clean, Private).

A consumer research technique called Response Latency builds on priming. This method measures the speed of your response - how fast you hit a computer key to apportion a certain attribute between two brands. For example, you will be flashed a word 'alluring' and then timed how quickly you choose it for each brand. The best way to see it in action is to experience it yourself - this methodology is used with Harvard's IAT test [here](#).

Response latency helps to distinguish between conscious thought and feelings, allowing researchers to take into account the implicit beliefs that exist below our conscious awareness. It is interesting to note that response latency techniques have consistently produced good or better indicators of action than questionnaire data - and when explicit and implicit thoughts contradict one another - the implicit ones are more reliable predictors of future behaviour.

May your year be a profitable and happy one. You have been primed.

Reference: Gerald Zaltman. How Customers Think: essential insights into the minds of the market. Harvard Business School Press, 2003.

ABOUT SID PEIMER

Sid Peimer believes in priming surfaces thoroughly - "I always line my stomach with something - you never know." He consults, speaks and writes on his website www.stratplanning.com.
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