I Know What I Saw: Advertising’S Distortion Effect on Memory

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This research investigates whether false memory reconstructed by post experience advertising, distorts consumer’s direct experience with the product. The memory effects created by post-experience advertising will endure over time as brand schema information if it reshapes consumers’ experiential memories. Recently several studies have indicated that advertising influences “how” and “what” consumers remember and consequently it can be used as a tool to reconstruct memory. This study explores whether post experience advertising can alter consumers’ memory such that they remember seeing the size of the product package bigger than it actually is.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Advertising is a powerful tool that can shape consumers’ perceptions about a product and effect their decision making process. It is well known that when advertising precedes product trial, it forms expectations that can be fulfilled or unfulfilled by product usage (Deighton 1984). Recent research (Loftus 1982; Cowley and Janus 2004; Braun, Ellis and Loftus 2002; Braun 1999) indicates that when advertising follows product experience it can alter consumers’ experiential memories causing consumers to remember the experience not necessarily as better but as different.

Memory schemas effect how consumers interpret sensory product experiences (Braun 1999). Memory distortion is a vast area in cognitive psychology investigated by hundreds of studies ranging from eyewitness testimony (Loftus 1979/1996; suggesting leading questions and the wording used in the questions can alter and direct a witnesses memory), to giving false information after direct experience. The latter one extends to autobiographical memory and called “the misinformation effect” (Loftus and Hoffman 1989). False memory differs from false information such that in false memory direct experience exists without any misleading information at first; however the interpretation of this experience is manipulated and altered by following misinformation.

The misinformation paradigm has intriguing implications for marketing research. One of the first studies in this area was of Braun and Loftus (1998) where they investigate whether advertising misinformation effect can change color memory for a previously seen candy bar wrapper. Later Braun (1999) made the consumers taste a poor orange juice mixed with salt and vinegar however showed the advertisements that depicted the juice as fresh, sweet and pure. The latter information provoked the consumers to remember the juice with a better taste than they originally consumed. Memory of that taste experience is reconstructed and bad experience is altered with a pleasant one. Later Cowley and Janus (2004) elaborated on Braun’s (1999) study, emphasizing on the centrality of the object of the misinformation to the experience and the type of memory [observation memory versus evaluation memory]. Using familiarity as a moderator Cowly and Janus (2004) explored whether advertising can prompt customers to believe they tasted a different product. In another study of Braun, Ellis and Loftus (2002) people believe to shake hands with an impossible TV character.

In this study a 2x2 between subjects experimental design was used to test whether post experience advertising can change consumers’ memory such that they remember seeing the size of the product package bigger than it actually is. A hypothetical chocolate brand, “Linden” was created and five different sized packages of Linden were produced. 152 undergraduate and graduate students participated in the study. Subjects came to the experimental setting expecting to participate in a country-wide package design test for Linden. They were briefly informed that Linden was a foreign chocolate manufacturer preparing to enter to the market and that the company wanted to know about consumers’ thoughts about the package of its product. To reduce demand effects, subjects were told that their honest feelings were very important for the company since the package could be altered to better suit consumers’ tastes. The experimenters then passed around identical samples of the Linden package (it was the medium size package of all five), asking respondents to examine the package carefully and allowing sufficient time for the task. After each subject examined the package, the experimenters collected the samples and administered a five minute distraction questionnaire measuring subjects’ proneness to brand loyalty.

Following the task, subjects were then exposed to either the verbal or the visual advertisement, depending on their experimental condition. Participants in the verbal group were shown an ad, which displayed a petite, female hand holding a Linden package 3 times larger than the original sample that they had examined in the beginning of the experiment. The ad also read: Linden, the biggest dark chocolate you’ve ever eaten. In order to strengthen the size effect, the ad was printed on a 297x420mm. glossy paper. In the verbal condition, participants listened to a 20 second long radio ad with a voice-over saying: Linden, the biggest dark chocolate you’ve ever eaten.

Following the ad, subjects in the no-repetition condition were asked to pick three words that best described their memory of the Linden package they previously examined. They were also asked about their attitude toward the Linden ad. In the repetition condition, however, subjects were exposed to the ad two more times, with five-minute distraction tasks in between. After exposure to the ad(s), participants were shown five Linden packages and were asked to identify the one they had previously examined. Of the five packages, one was a replica of the original sample used in the beginning of the experiment, while the other four differed in size (two of them bigger and two of them smaller than the original sample). After the identification task, subjects’ were asked to assess their memory of the package using Tulving’s Remember/Know/Guess measure, in which they indicated a ‘remember’ judgment if they were able to picture the original package in the mind’s eye, a ‘know’ judgment if their identification was based more on familiarity, and a ‘guess’ judgment if they didn’t have any recollection of the original package and randomly picked one of the choices. Finally, participants were asked to fill an ad skepticism questionnaire and were debriefed.

The participants in the control group weren’t exposed to any advertisements. They were shown the chocolate package, given the same filler questionnaires and asked to recall in their own words their experience with Linden packaging and to identify the package they had seen before.

Ordered logistic regression was used to analyze the results. A highly significant distortion effect for both ways
(subjects choosing both bigger and smaller packages) was observed. Involvement and ad skepticism were found to be important covariates. Visual advertisements caused more distortion and produced more “Remember” judgments than verbal advertisements. Although the major findings can be summed up as above, the analysis is not finalized yet; the study is still ongoing and more detailed findings are yet to come.