The Dissociation Between Consumers’ Memory Predictions and Memory Performance

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We examine memory predictions and memory performance of consumers for items they needed to buy. We document an interaction between item-specific familiarity and shopping strategy on memory performance, unanticipated by memory predictions, to shed light into the situations in which consumers are likely to forget items they intended to buy.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Forgetting to buy items at the supermarket is a problem for most consumers. Yet, only about half of consumers use shopping lists. We interviewed shoppers in two supermarkets in Colorado, and found that only 40% had written a shopping list. We also found that shoppers don’t use lists because they think they will remember without one. However, shoppers’ beliefs about their memory could be wrong. In specific situations, they may incorrectly predict that they will remember to buy what they need in the supermarket, not take appropriate actions to help them remember (use a shopping list) and end up forgetting.

We examine memory predictions and memory performance of consumers for items they needed to buy at the grocery store. We show that memory predictions fail to consider two key factors that influence memory (item familiarity and in-store exposure). Consumers are likely to forget unfamiliar items when focused on fast and efficient buying. Moreover, they don’t anticipate they would forget in those situations and thus fail to use a much needed shopping list.

Memory depends on two sources of activation of items’ representations: (a) Activation that is stable base-level (Anderson et al. 2004; Higgins 1996). For example, familiar items are chronically activated in memory, making them easier to access (Hall 1954). (b) Activation from exposure to items (Anderson et al. 2004). For example, shopping items can be retrieved when shoppers are exposed to items they need while performing an extensive search and visiting most aisles in the store (van Osselaer and Janiszewski 2012). Memory predictions are highly influenced by the ease-of-retrieval. For example, when consumers figure out that they need to buy a certain product in the supermarket, they are likely to think they will remember to buy later in the supermarket. However, in-store memory is only sufficiently high when products are either chronically accessible or presented in the stimulus environment. As a result, consumers are more likely to forget unfamiliar items especially when scanning just a few categories in the store rather than when scanning many categories in the store. In addition, consumers do not use a shopping list when it is needed as they fail to anticipate when they are more likely to forget.

In study 1 and 2, participants had to remember 10 items. Right after participants were exposed to the items, they were asked to predict how many they would remember few minutes later. After a time interval, participants entered an online shopping task in study 1, and were asked to remember the products either in a recall task or a recognition task in study 2. In both studies we manipulated whether we asked participants to buy familiar or unfamiliar items. Moreover, to study the interactive effect of item characteristics and search strategy, in study 1 we measured how many categories people browsed in the online store (as a measure of narrow vs. broad search). In study 2, we mimicked memory vs. stimulus-based search strategies using the type of memory task (recall vs. recognition). As hypothesized, memory suffers when consumers shop for unfamiliar items and scan a few categories (in study 1) or in recall tasks (in study 2). Memory predictions do not anticipate this pattern. As a result, participants were overconfident in their memory for unfamiliar items when visiting few categories (in study 1) or in recall tasks (in study 2). In study 3, respondents were asked to answer questions about their grocery shopping behavior and hypothetical questions of how many of 10 items they would remember to buy on a shopping trip as well as the likelihood of using a shopping list in that situation. We find that forgetting to buy is a problem for most of our respondents. In addition, memory predictions highly influence the decision to use a shopping list. The more items shoppers think they will forget, the more likely they are to use a shopping list.

The main goal of this paper is to explain the common experience of forgetting to buy and why consumers often fail to avoid it by the use of a shopping list. We disclose the situations in which consumers forget and fail to anticipate it. In-store memory depends on base-level and incoming activation of items. Memory needs chronic activation or recurrent exposure to the items. Without this, people are likely to forget. However, consumers fail to take into account those factors when predicting their memory. Consumers make flawed memory predictions because they ignore base-level activation from familiarity with items and incoming activation from exposure to the items that boost in-store memory performance. Identifying our misconceptions about memory is a first step towards remedying the problem of forgetting. Consumers forget when their memory predictions are wrong such that they mistakenly think they would not need a shopping list.

Although our empirical strategy centered on shopping for groceries, implications of our findings should extend to other tasks in which memory is crucial. For example, consumers need to remember to pay the bills, book a flight, save money, take medication, among other tasks. Our results should also have implications for non-consumer tasks. Memory mistakes can cause inconvenience, when people forget to call someone else, and tragedies, when babies are forgotten inside the car. People are more likely to forget when they are busy such that cues in the environment do not activate the task and when the task is unfamiliar such that it is not chronically activated in memory, even though people cannot predict their memory would be lower in those situations. This research shows not only the situations in which consumers are more likely to forget, but also to fail to anticipate they would so. Successful memory requires the use of memory aids (Intons-Peterson and Fournier 1986). When people are not accurate about how well they will remember, they cannot adequately prepare memory aids. Consumers might be better off erring on the side of caution and using a simple rule: Don’t ask yourself if you’ll remember. Just write a shopping list.

REFERENCES

Intons-Peterson, Margaret J. and JoAnne Fournier (1986), “External and Internal Memory Aids: When and how often do we Use them?,” Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 115, 267–280.