Consumer Memory For Easy-To-Pronounce Non-Word Brand Names: the Effect of Attitudes

Paula Chesley, University of Minnesota, USA
Dawn Lerman, Fordham University, USA

An eye-tracking, lexical decision, and free recall study provides evidence for consumers remembering new blends (flackers, flax + crackers) and derivations (Wheatables, Wheat + -able + -s) better than new acronyms (IBM). The importance of attitudes and in-group word use in memorability of new brand names is also highlighted.

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Paula Chesley, University of Minnesota, USA
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Extended abstract

Among the many criteria that marketers should consider when creating new brands names is ease of pronunciation (Kohli and LaBahn, 1997). An easy-to-pronounce name may be critical when the consumer must ask for the brand (Lerman, 2003) and as Bao, Shao and Rivers (2008) argue may also aid processing and retrieval. This is important as brand name memorability is considered important for marketplace success (Keller, 1993).

Generally, word names best fit the ease-of-pronunciation criterion as they have been learned previously by the consumer and are already represented in the consumer’s lexicon. However, the task of finding new easy-to-pronounce and thus memorable brand names is complicated by the fact that the vast majority of English words have already been trademarked. This challenges marketers to create non-word brand names that are easily pronounceable. Two types of non-word brands names fitting this criterion are acronyms (e.g., UPS) and morphemic non-words. A morphemic non-word may be a derivation (base + affix as in Wheatables=Wheat + -able + -s) or a blend (combination of two words, e.g., flashers = flax + crackers or dunch = dinner + lunch).

Conventional wisdom (see, for example, Robertson, 1989) suggests that the use of acronyms and/or morphemes in brand naming aids memorability. However, the results of empirical research are mixed, particularly for morphemic non-word names. For example, Lerman (2003) found that the use of morphemes aids memory whereas Lowrey, Shrum and Dubitsky (2003) found that at least one type of morphemic device—blends—impedes memory, particularly for less familiar brands. In the case of acronyms, consumer researchers cite a single study conducted by Bower in 1972 suggesting that acronyms aid memory.

Our study seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining consumer memory for easy to pronounce non-word brand names. We propose that memory for easy-to-pronounce brand names is a function not only of name type (i.e., acronym, blend, morphemic derivation) but also of consumer attitudes toward the name. We expect, for example, that the perceived utility or humor that a consumer associates with a name will influence memory. The results of an empirical study suggest that name type and consumer attitudes toward the name do indeed influence memory retention of new words.

We ran a combined lexical decision and eye-tracking experiment with new acronyms, blends, and derivations that have appeared on websites and in a variety of media including television. A pre-test determined that our 45 participants were unlikely to have seen these words beforehand. Each word appeared with its definition one at a time on a computer screen. With the word and definition still visible, participants responded to a series of attitudinal questions about the word’s perceived utility (Corbin, 1987), emotional content (Kensinger & Corkin, 2003), humor (Metcalf, 2004), and degree of formality. Immediately following completion of the attitudinal measures for the last word, half of the participants were tested on recall. We tested the other half after one night’s sleep; this allowed us to examine the consolidation of new words into long-term memory.

We fit mixed-effects models for reaction time (RT), lexical decision accuracy, number of fixations, number of regressions, and free recall. Control variables included participant sex, age, and education level, word length, and frequencies of initial component words. Although shorter in length overall, acronyms took significantly longer than blends or derivations to read, and decision accuracy for acronyms was significantly lower than for blends and derivations. This effect holds for acronyms that can be pronounced as letters (FSBO, “For Sale By Owner”) as well as words (BITGOD, “Back In The Good Old Days”). Both groups of participants (i.e., immediate and delayed recall groups) fared worse on acronyms, as an intervening night’s sleep significantly shortened RTs and improved accuracy for only blends and derivations. This improvement after one night’s sleep is in line with recent research suggesting sleep is helpful in memory consolidation of new vocabulary items (Dumay and Gaskell, 2007). Unlike Lowrey et al. (2003), we find no inhibitory effect for blends: no significant difference between blends and derivations appeared in any dependent variable. Furthermore, the only significant attitudinal question that was consistently significant was, “Would you use this word at a party with your friends?” The more participants said they would use a new word at a party, the shorter their RT and the better their accuracy and free recall. Hypothetical use in other social contexts like “at work or school” was only a significant predictor for free recall and was negatively correlated with memory retention.

These findings indicate that both word formation type and attitudes about the social utility of a new word are important factors in whether consumers remember words that are new to them. There are several implications of this work for marketing. First, by any measurement of memory retention, acronyms appear especially difficult to remember. Moreover, participants often volunteered their distaste for acronyms with comments like “I hate acronyms. . .they sound like jargon.” These findings suggest that at least new brand names that are acronyms will be more difficult to remember than blends and derivations. Blends, for their part, were less problematic than expected—perhaps this is due to their ever-increasing presence in advertising and the lexicon in general.

The findings concerning consumer attitudes highlight the importance of social context in remembering new lexical items. In addition to examining responses to individual questions such as “Would you use this word at a party with your friends?”, we also took the first
and second factors in a principal component analysis as predictor variables. Responses to the party question were more robust than the first principal component, which implies a specific judgment concerning utility and social context as opposed to an overall impression about the word. The “party effect” could be an exciting link between individual cognitive entrenchment and in-group vocabulary choice. This suggests that marketing for new brand names which focuses on in-group usage of the word, if applicable, could be an effective strategy for consumer memory retention.

References

Two Small Steps, One Giant Leap: Effect of Movement Signals on Consumers’ Walking Speed
Gaby Schellekens, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands
Bram Van den Bergh, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

This research examined the effects of movement signals, such as path of footprints or squares on consumers walking path and walking speed. Three studies demonstrated that exposure to a path of movement signals causes following behavior even if the route is less attractive, and that the distance between of movement signals has an effect on walking speed.

In-store shopping movement paths of consumers have received increasing attention lately (Hui and colleagues, 2009; 2010). Arrows or a depicted path of footprints on the floor of the store are attempts to guide consumers movements paths. It avoids inconvenient store traffic flow, and can pull customers deeper into a store. Rather surprisingly, the actual effect of these movement signals on the travel patterns has remained unstudied. This research examined the implicit effects of depicting a path of movement signals on consumers walking behavior.

From past experiences, people know that a path of footprints, stripes or arrows indicate a route to follow. For instance, arrows in a subway station or a row of light dots in an airplane direct the route to the nearest exit. Frequent exposure to these environmental cues can lead to an automatic association between exposure to a depicted path and the behavior of following this path, which leads to automatic following behavior (H1). When consumers are exposed to footprints in a path, they may attempt to mimic the indicated steps by placing their feet on the footprints. Mimicry of other people’s behavior is an inborn tendency, based on the notion that we simply do what we see (Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001). Evidence for the mimicry of other people’s body posture, facial expression and speech related variables is abundant (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Chartrand, Maddux & Lakin, 2005). While, previous research mainly focused on the mimicry of observable human behavior, we argue that even in the absence of a human model, human-like cues, like a depicted path of footsteps suggestive of a human walking path could also automatically trigger mimicry. Correspondingly, it is hypothesized that when the distance between the depicted movement signals is larger (vs. smaller) than an average human footstep, consumers will walk faster (H2). We argue that consumers do not have to be aware of the influence of (the distance of) the footprints on their motion path, nor of their walking speed for these effects to occur.

In study 1 we used footprints that look like the print of a shoe placed on a human walking rhythm. For a smaller distance between the footprints the average foot size is used, which is about 30 cm (Agnihotri, Shukla, & Purwar, 2007). For a larger distance between the footprints, an average foot size was added to the average footstep (which is 74 cm: Judge, Davis, & Ounpuu, 1996), summing up to about 100 cm. The movement signals were printed on white sticker paper, and were pasted on a grey linoleum floor.

In study 1 the participants (N=60) were randomly assigned to one of three movement signal conditions (small distance vs. large distance vs. no footsteps). First, this study tested if peoples’ walking paths can be affected by a path of footprints; footprints were placed on a non dominant path (‘alternative route’) of an Y-junction on the participants walking route after finishing a filler study. The participant’s walking time and chosen route unobtrusively recorded by research assistant. As expected, without a depiction of footprints,