LEFT UNSPOKEN

What advertisers don’t say might be just as important as what they do say.

“Lasts 20 per cent longer,” the ad tells us. “Feels softer.” “Smells fresher.” Advertisers invest a lot of time in carefully crafting words and phrases like these to help us form a positive impression of their products and guide us towards buying it.

But how much are our choices impacted by the things that aren’t said? Marketing professor Aradhna Kratika has carried out an integrative review of research on the impact of sensory marketing – that is, the creation of subconscious triggers that form “consumer perceptions of abstract notions of the product.”

According to Kratika’s review, in a world where we are constantly bombarded with explicit marketing appeals, subconscious triggers appealing to the basic senses (sight, smell, hearing and touch) may be a more efficient way of engaging consumers. For example, one piece of research demonstrated that Frosh brand ice cream sounds creamier than Frosch brand. Another study tells us that French accents and husky-voiced females are better at making us believe a product is ‘sexy’.

Touch and go

It seems that small affects our perceptions too – after two weeks, test subjects could recall more characteristics of a pine-scented pencil than they could of the same pencil with no scent. A number of other studies have demonstrated that pleasant scents can enhance evaluations of products and stores.

And as for the other two senses, touch and sight: 40% of subjects taking part in a study declined to eat a piece of chocolate fudge shaped like a dog poo (despite knowing it was fudge), and many also refused to drink a liquid that had been touched by a sterilised cockroach. Those who declined to eat the fudge or drink the drink could not explain why.

“An integrative review of sensory marketing: Engaging the senses to affect health, judgment and behaviour” can be found in the Journal of Consumer Psychology.

NEGATIVE SENTIMENT

Using social media to monitor depression prevalence

Researchers in the US are investigating the use of social media as a resource for mental health surveillance. Michael Conway – who researches behavioural medicine – and his team are looking specifically at using Twitter and other microblog data to monitor the prevalence of major depressive disorder – the most common debilitating illness in the US.

Mental health surveillance currently takes place via high-cost, large-scale telephone surveys. However, the largest of these surveys reach only a very small (0.13%) proportion of the population.

Conway believes that Twitter et al offer “a rich, if terse, multilingual source of real-time data for public health surveillance.” He proposes using natural language processing techniques and resources – algorithms, lexicons and taxonomies – to support the identification of depression symptoms in Twitter data. He believes that this could be a cost-effective and flexible approach to augmenting the existing telephone-based surveillance methods.

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Crawford Hollingworth reviews the science of habit formation, and offers some pointers to help those New Year’s resolutions stick.

Getting others to change their behaviour, or even making changes in our own lives, is harder than we think. But building new habits is necessary for growth, so thinking about the steps we can take to achieve this is vital to success.

Over the last decade or so there have been a number of breakthroughs in our understanding of the field. Researchers have examined individual routines in detail to determine how habits might be formed, as well as investigating the impact that contextual changes, existing habits and rewards (both psychological and tangible) have on shaping behaviour. The following guide to forming habits is the result of that thinking.

**Step 1** Choose a new habit or behavioural goal, and focus on it

Behavioural experts Bas Verplanken and Henk Aarts have described habits as “learned sequences of acts that have become automatic responses to specific cues”.

The first step in forming a new habit, therefore, is to pick the behaviour you want to make a habit of. With this new habit in mind, the next two steps are based around a very simple model that promotes repetition of the behaviour – a model that has been termed the ‘habit loop’. Following these steps helps to create the habit loop by developing automaticity – a key feature of any habit.

**Step 2** Identify the behavioural cue or trigger that will drive your new habit

Habits are triggered by contextual information, so identifying the possible existing contextual triggers that might facilitate them is a key step in making the behaviour a habit.

Behavioural scientists have identified five primary types of contextual triggers:

- **Location** – where we are
- **Time** – of day or year
- **Other people** – who we’re with, and what they’re doing
- **Emotional state** – how we feel; our mood
- **Immediately preceding action** – what we’ve been doing

Connecting new behaviours to existing behaviours – a concept known as ‘piggybacking’ – is a strategic approach to new habit formation. Behavioural scientist BJ Fogg of Stanford University’s Persuasive Technology Lab set himself the target of completing two push-ups every time he visited the bathroom. He was soon doing 100.

**Step 3** Use tangible, subconscious and biological rewards to build a habit loop

In almost all habitual behaviours we can identify a reward element that gives the habit its addictive appeal. Creating a reward can motivate and encourage us to carry out a particular behaviour, especially if it’s difficult or time-consuming.

The reward could be tangible: like cycling to work and picking up an espresso from your favourite coffee shop once you’ve arrived. Or it could be a monetary incentive: a study on travel habits found that free bus passes in Stuttgart helped to create a new habit of using public transport among people who had recently moved to the city. A reward can also be subconscious – a sense of progress, perhaps, at the end of a long day at work – or physiological, like the runner’s dopamine ‘high’.

Slow and steady

So when looking to build new habitual behaviours, think about the habit loop and identify the trigger and reward. And remember that cementing habits takes time.

A study conducted by Philippa Lally and colleagues at the Health Behaviour Research Centre at UCL in 2009 found that it took anywhere between 18 days and 254 days to cement a new habit. The average was 66 days.

Crawford Hollingworth is co-founder of The Behavioural Architects

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