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What Does Advertising Do?

When you don't pay attention to ads, they affect you.

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We live in a world of [advertising](#). It is a world of our making, of course. We don't like to pay the full price of things, so we allow other people to pay part of that price in exchange for letting them pass a message to us. So, we open up the pages of our favorite magazine, and there are glossy ads for clothes, shoes, cars, or beer. We turn on the television, and smiling faces on television try to sell us soup, toothpaste, candy, and politicians.

The reason that we accept all this advertising is that we assume that we can tune most of it out. If we don't pay [attention](#) to the ads, then they won't have that much of an affect on our behavior. Sure, the makers of commercials can try to jack up the volume, but at least we have the right to look away.

Right?

A paper slated to appear in the December, 2010 issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research* by Melanie Dempsey and Andrew Mitchell suggests that the picture might not be so rosy. These researchers did two clever studies that ought to make us think twice about how much advertising we allow ourselves to be exposed to.

We usually assume that advertising functions mostly to tell us about the properties of a product. A particular detergent might advertise that it gets stains out better than competitors, that it smells good, and that it leaves clothes feeling fresh. We believe that these properties are ones that will help us to choose the detergent we want to buy.

However, ads also do other things. One thing they do is to take a product and to put it next to lots of other things that we already feel positively about. For example, an ad for detergent may have fresh flowers, cute babies, and sunshine in it. All of these things are ones that we probably feel pretty good about already. And repeatedly showing the detergent along with other things that we feel good about can make us feel good about the detergent, too. This transfer of our feelings from one set of items to another is called *affective conditioning* (the word affect means feelings).

In these studies, Dempsey and Mitchell told people about two brands of pens. One brand had better properties than the other. So, objectively, that better brand is the one people should have picked. Before making a choice about the pens, though, some people did what they thought was an unrelated experiment in which they watched pictures on a screen that flashed quickly. Some of these pictures paired the brand name of the pen that had the worse set of properties with a lot of positive items. This procedure is known to create affective conditioning.

So, this experiment put two sources of information in opposition. People had a set of properties about the pens that suggested one brand was better than the other. And the group that did not go through the affective conditioning procedure picked this brand most of the time when asked to choose a pen.

The people who went through the affective conditioning procedure picked the pen that was paired with positive items 70-80 percent of the time. They chose this pen, even though they had information that the other pen was better. Over the two studies in this paper, the authors found that people chose the pen that was paired with positive objects even when people were given as much time as they wanted to make a choice, and even when the instructions specifically encouraged them to pick the best choice and to say why they were choosing a particular pen.

These results suggest that the most powerful effect of advertising is just to create a good feeling about a product by surrounding it with other things that you like. It is also important to point out that affective conditioning is most effective when you don't realize that it is happening. That is, trying to pay less attention to the ads you see on TV and in magazines may actually make this type of advertising more effective.

So, why do we choose things just because we feel good about them? The world is a busy place. It is hard for us to feel confident that we have all of the objective facts about anything, whether it is products, people, or choices of things to do. The feelings we have are often a good marker of what is safe to do and what is likely to turn out well. If we have to make a choice, and one of the options just feels good to us, then we are likely to go with the one that feels good.

Most of the time, of course, that is a good idea. Often, we feel good about something because we have had positive experiences with it in the past. The problem is that we allow advertisers to have access to our mental world. They have paid for the opportunity to slip information to us about what feels good. That information ultimately affects the way we make choices, whether we know it or not.