

Advertising and the seven sins of memory

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A positive intention may be formed as a result of exposure to an advertisement, but if a memory malfunction interferes with that intention, the advertising will be ineffective. This paper considers the implications for advertisers of Daniel Schacter's 'seven sins of memory': transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias and persistence. Each of the 'sins' is explained in detail and advice provided for advertisers on how to avoid these pitfalls.

INTRODUCTION

As if effective marketing communication were not hard enough to achieve, even if we succeed in getting our message attended to and processed, and a positive intention formed, the very nature of memory may step in and upset everything. Memory distortion and plain old forgetting are unfortunate facts of life. The important question, however, is: can we do anything about it? As with most things, if we are to have any hope of dealing with memory problems and their impact upon advertising and other marketing communications, we must first understand what is going on.

In this paper we will be looking at what Daniel Schacter (2001) has called 'the seven sins of memory': transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias and persistence. Most of what Schacter is dealing with involves declarative memory and not procedural memory, and as a result is highly dependent upon activity in the hippocampus. Although other brain structures are involved in mediating declarative memory, the hippocampus is critical, especially for tasks emphasising the representational as opposed to temporal properties of declarative memory. The hippocampus is always active

in encoding new information for declarative memory. Nondeclarative emotional memory is also involved here, especially in the cases of bias and persistence, which means activity in the amygdala as well. There is compelling evidence that the amygdala is critical to emotional learning and memory (cf. Griffiths 1997).

Imperfections in memory have obvious implications for the successful processing of advertising. Even if a positive intention is formed as a result of exposure to an advert, if a memory malfunction interferes with that intention, the advertising will be ineffective. The problems associated with these 'seven sins of memory', and what advertisers can do about it, are discussed below.

THE SIN OF TRANSIENCE

Forgetting that naturally occurs over time may be thought of as transience. While the memory of what one did yesterday may be all but perfect, over time those memories tend to become more a generic description of what one expects to happen under those circumstances rather than what actually did happen.

- *Advertising implication:* The sin of transience implies that what people 'recall' from advertising is much more likely to reflect a *generic description* of *what is expected* about a brand rather than the specific benefits that are part of the message. This has clear implications for interpreting recall measures of advertising messages. But, more importantly, it also suggests that the specific content of marketing communication should be consistent with, or carefully integrated with, prior understandings of the brand. A recent advert for Reynolds Wrap illustrates this can be done with a headline 'Sticky Foods Won't Stic' spelled out in cheese on a pan of lasagne, with a portion cut out of the corner cutting off the last letter of 'stick', revealing the aluminium foil, clean, beneath.

Transience increases with age. While older adults – those over 50 years of age – have the same ability to remember in the short term as younger people, over time, memory of specific detail deteriorates more rapidly. As a result, older adults tend to rely upon a general sense of 'knowing' rather than specific recall.

The problem of memory transience can be mediated by more elaborative encoding, essentially by stimulating the lower left frontal cortex. One popular way of trying to encourage more elaborate encoding is by using visual imagery mnemonics to facilitate memory. In fact, this idea goes back to the early Greeks. Unfortunately for marketing communication, not only does using visual mnemonics require a great deal of concentration and effort (and there is no easy way to encourage such effort), but for most people there is really very little evidence of general memory improvement using such techniques.

- *Advertising implication:* However, one way to encourage more elaborative encoding to help reduce transience is to relate information the target audience is interested in remembering with something they already know. In advertising, this could be encouraged with questions in the copy to stimulate elaboration: for example, in a recent advert for the Dodge Caravan with the headline 'What Idiot Coined the Phrase "Stay at Home Mom"?'

THE SIN OF ABSENT-MINDEDNESS

When one fails to pay proper attention to something and as a result does not encode it properly, or when the information is actually in memory, but overlooked when needed to be retrieved, one experiences the sin of absent-mindedness. Absent-mindedness manifests itself both in failing to remember past experiences as well as in failing to remember to do something in the future. Both, of course, can prove troublesome for marketing communication. Also, the fact that absent-mindedness is more likely for routine experiences that do not in and of themselves require elaborative encoding (e.g. exposure to advertising) adds to the problem.

Unfortunately, routine behaviour (which certainly includes such things as reading magazines and watching television) is associated with low levels of prefrontal cortex activity in the left inferior area, which makes it difficult to form vivid memories. Such automatic or superficial levels of encoding can also lead to something known as 'change blindness' (Simons & Levin 1998), where people fail to detect changes over time, because of an inability to recall details. This has

obvious implications for the introduction of new benefits over time in advertising campaigns, or for repositioning.

Memories for past experiences may be classified as either recollections or familiarity. Recalling specific details from memory (e.g. remembering specific benefit claims from an advert) is defined as *recollection*. *Familiarity* is when one has a sense of simply being aware of something without recalling specific details (e.g. remembering 'seeing' an advert, but not particular content). This difference is important, because when there is divided attention during exposure, there is a *significant* effect upon recollection, but *little or no effect* upon familiarity (cf. studies by Craik *et al.* 1996).

- *Advertising implication:* Because one is more likely to pay partial attention rather than full attention to advertising, familiarity with advertising is more likely than recollection of specifics from the advertisement. This underscores the importance of maintaining a consistent 'look and feel' over time (Percy *et al.* 2001), encouraging familiarity, and utilising imagery that will elicit a positive benefit (associated with the brand) even at low or even sub-cognitive levels of attention. Additionally, too much exposure, especially massed exposure, could lead to lower levels of specific 'recollection' (as we understand from as long ago as Ebbinghaus 1885). Spaced exposures generally result in better memory, a finding demonstrated in Strong's simulations (1974) of various media schedules based upon Zielske's work, and more recently in fMRI studies conducted by Wagner *et al.* (1998).

Remembering to do something in the future (e.g. buying an advertised brand the next time you are shopping) is described by psychologists as 'prospective memory'. Einstein and McDaniel (1990, 1997 with Shaw) have offered a useful way of looking at this idea of prospective memory, distinguishing between what they call 'event-based' prospective memory, where we want to remember to do something at a specific event, and 'time-based' prospective memory, when one wishes to remember to do something at a specific time in the future. An example of event-based prospective memory would be wanting to buy a new brand the next time you are at the store. An example of time-based prospective memory would be making sure you are home at 3p.m. to meet the delivery man.

Why people experience prospective memory failure is that they are usually so preoccupied with other things in their lives that when the

event occurs, or the time arrives when it is necessary to remember to do something, the correct associations in memory are not activated.

- *Advertising implication:* Prospective memory failure may be minimised in advertising by using distinctive cues that are unlikely to be associated with other long-term memories (especially for competitive brands). It is important to establish links in memory with the appropriate category need in such a way that when a purchase or usage occasion occurs, it will trigger a memory of the intention to act. This is especially true for recognition-driven brand awareness, which means for most package goods products. In the store point-of-purchase material as well as packaging must be both sufficiently informative to trigger the stored memory of an intention to buy, and be distinctive enough to minimise confusion with other brand memories. Shoppers are almost always in a hurry and preoccupied with other things when they are in a store, and this may get in the way of attending to the appropriate prospective memory cue. This is just the sort of thing that goes on when a salesman creates a distraction, hoping you will forget all about your initial good intentions not to be influenced by his pitch, as we know from the literature on compliant behaviour (cf. Cialdini 2001).

THE SIN OF BLOCKING

We are all familiar with the sin of blocking, that all-too-familiar experience of recognising someone but not being able to remember their name. According to Schacter (2001), blocking is not the same thing as absent-mindedness or transience. In the case of blocking, the memory has been encoded and stored, unlike absent-mindedness. In fact, an appropriate retrieval cue could be in place, but the association is just not made. Unlike transience, with blocking, the information is still in memory, but remains just out of reach when required.

Because blocking generally occurs when trying to remember names, it potentially can be a problem for *brand* names. Blocking seems to originate in the left temporal pole, where there is a breakdown in the link made between the characteristics associated with something and the name by which it is known. The reason people often have trouble

remembering someone's name is that a person's name tends to be isolated in memory from any conceptual knowledge about that person and, as a result, difficult to retrieve.

Most models of name retrieval hold that activation of phonological representations in memory occur only *after* activation of conceptual and visual representations. This is why it is easier to recall something about a person than to recall their name. It is also what can lead to remembering something about a product without being able to recall the brand name. Interestingly, names that are most likely to be blocked are familiar ones which have not recently been encountered (Burke *et al.* 1991).

- *Advertising implication:* Brand names that are not well integrated or related to obvious associations with category need will be highly susceptible to blocking. If there are no logical and immediate links in memory between a brand name and the category need, there is the risk of occasional blocking. Arbitrary or more abstract brand names will be blocked more often than descriptive brand names, even when those names are equally familiar to people (cf. Brédant & Valentine 1998). Brand names such as Vitalegs (a herbal gel that relieves tired legs) and Soft Scrub (a cleanser that enables you to clean without harsh scratching) illustrate good descriptive brand names that are less likely to be susceptible to blocking.

To minimise blocking, it is necessary to suppress the retrieval of recently encountered information that is related to a recall cue so that the mind is not cluttered with irrelevancies that could interfere with the desired memory.

- *Advertising implication:* When a brand possesses identical or similar benefits as the leading brand in its category, it will be that much harder to build an association for those benefits with the brand because of learned interference from advertising for the leading brand. This again suggests the need to have copy (and packaging as well as other marketing communication) *unique* to a brand in order to avoid multiple connections in memory that could minimise or override the desired brand-related memory.

Certain retrieval inhibitions that lead to blocking can be 'released' if we encounter a sufficiently powerful cue (e.g. nondeclarative emotional memories) that helps us re-experience something in the

same way in which it was initially experienced. Appropriate triggers in advertising or other marketing communication that elicit the correct emotional memories may help overcome retrieval inhibitions, and release positive memories for a brand. A wonderful advert for Nestlé's Toll House chocolate chips showing a mother with a pan of chocolate chip cookies fresh out of the oven with a little girl looking on in anticipation perfectly illustrates this point.

THE SIN OF MISATTRIBUTION

If one correctly remembers something learned, but attributes it to the wrong source, this is misattribution. Often referred to as 'unconscious transference', it causes real problems with eyewitness identification. The problem stems from a strong sense of general familiarity, coupled with an absence of specific recollection. While the consequences of misattribution in advertising are obviously not as serious as they are with eyewitness identification, it can nevertheless cause marketers real problems.

- *Advertising implication:* Avoiding misattribution requires more than simply retrieving appropriate benefits from memory. The benefit must be linked together in memory in such a way that you make the correct association of the brand with its benefit claim. This linking process is known as 'memory binding'. All of the important brand-benefit associations in advertising must be bound together by the receiver into a unifying whole at the time of encoding. When advertising for different brands is visually or verbally similar, this memory binding is unlikely to occur, leading to memory conjunction error. Memory conjunction errors occur because people misattribute strong familiarity with similar (even if not identical) things from more than one source as coming from a single source; brand advertising in our case. Interestingly, a strong visual-verbal congruence can help minimise misattribution (cf. Schacter *et al.* 1999). A recent series of adverts for Good Humor-Breyers uses the *exact* format and headline ('Less fat, fewer calories, no guilt') for three brands: Popsicle, Breyers and Klondike. This would seem to almost encourage misattribution.

THE SIN OF SUGGESTIBILITY

Suggestibility in memory occurs because one tends to include information that has been learned from an outside source as something personally experienced. This information may come from any external source, including advertising or other marketing communication. While suggestibility is similar to the sin of misattribution, misattribution does not require suggestions from outside sources. But when the two combine, it is quite possible for us to develop memories of something which in fact never occurred.

- *Advertising implication:* Interestingly, while suggestibility may be a 'sin' of memory, in the world of marketing communication this sin may often become a blessing. For example, suggestive questions may produce memory distortions by creating source memory problems. As a result, advertising that utilises questions that remind people of a favourable brand association could occasion a 'memory' for that positive experience, even if it never occurred, e.g.: 'Remember how easy it is to remove those nasty stains when you use our brand?'

Schacter has suggested that if you embellish a fake memory with vivid mental images it should make it look and feel like a true memory. This is based upon work done by Hyman and Pentland (1996) in successfully creating false childhood memories via suggestion, simply by asking subjects about things that never occurred. One of the important conclusions they drew from their work is that these false memories produce vivid *visual images*.

- *Advertising implication:* The application to advertising is obvious. If a suggested favourable experience with a brand is reinforced with a strong visual image of such an experience, it should help seed a memory of a positive experience.

In an extension of these ideas, we know that one of the best ways to elicit early childhood memories is to ask someone to 'visualise' themselves as children. While there is no evidence that anyone can remember anything much earlier than about two years of age, because the areas of the brain needed for episodic memory are not fully mature until that age, with suggestive visualisation techniques one can create false 'memories' for events going back almost to birth (cf. Spanos *et al.* 1999). The key here, as in all suggestibility, is *expectancy*. If

one is instructed to expect something, and it seems plausible, it is possible to create rather strong false memories.

- *Advertising implication:* It is very difficult to suggest a false memory for something that runs counter to a recent or strong existing memory. If you don't like a brand, advertising is not likely to create a false memory that you do; nor should you try. But if a brand is one of a set of brands used by the receiver, it is certainly possible to suggest more positive experiences with that brand. And if it is a brand they have not used, if the advertising can relate it to a positive experience from childhood, it is quite possible to suggest positive memories for the *benefit*, and then link it to the brand.

THE SIN OF BIAS

The sin of bias reflects how current understandings, beliefs and feelings have the ability to distort how one interprets new experiences and the memory of them. Biases that are associated with memory of past experiences will greatly influence how one perceives and understands new information or situations. Schacter talks about five major types of bias: consistency, change, hindsight, egocentric and stereotypical biases.

Gazzaniga (1998) has identified something in the left brain that he calls an 'interpreter' that continuously draws upon people's experiences and understanding of things in order to provide some stability to their psychological world. This would seem to be the neurological source of biases, and utilises such things as inferences, rationalisations and generalisations in relating the past with the present, enabling people to justify their present attitudes with past experiences and feelings. The left brain interpreter, however, is mediated by systems in the right brain that are more attuned to actual representations of what is going on in the world around us.

Consistency and change bias

Consistency bias reflects a tendency to behave (or believe) today in a fashion consistent with how one remembers similar previous experiences. When this happens, current experiences and feelings are filtered through and made to match memories of those past

experiences and feelings. Because memories are not 'exact', people tend to infer their past beliefs, attitudes and feelings from what they are experiencing today.

- *Advertising implication:* This suggests that for people who hold current positive attitudes toward a brand, advertising could imply they are of long standing. For brand switchers who include a particular brand in their purchase set, advertising could imply a long standing *preference* for that brand: 'You know you have always liked this brand, why not buy more?'

Something similar occurs with change bias, where one remembers something being worse than it actually was, making what they feel now an improvement by comparison. Both consistency and change bias can occur because they help reduce cognitive dissonance, even when someone is not really aware of the source of the inconsistency they are trying to manage (Lieberman *et al.* 2000).

Hindsight bias

Hindsight bias is that familiar feeling that one has always known something would happen *after* becoming aware of the outcome. One is reconstructing the past to make it consistent with the present. The key here seems to be an activation of general knowledge. The new information is integrated with other general knowledge in semantic memory, and is not distinguished as such in making judgements. There is evidence that this selective recall is a function of the general knowledge that influences perception and comprehension, and a vulnerability to misattribution.

- *Advertising implication:* Hindsight bias would seem to indicate that when exposed to advertising or other marketing communication one will 'recall' benefit claims that are not actually made, but which would have been expected to be there because of the claims that actually were made. Work by Carli (1999) tends to support this idea. Recent adverts for Infusium 23 set up a 'before-after' case, but leave out the 'before' picture, with the headline 'You really think I would let them publish the before picture?' This clever execution encourages hindsight bias as you imagine the 'before' hair problem.

Egocentric bias

The 'self' plays an important role in one's ongoing mental life, and is at the root of egocentric bias. When encoding new information by relating it to the self, memory for that information will be better than other types of encoding. This is because people are more likely to value their own understanding of things, among other reasons because the self-concept plays a key role in regulating mental activity. As Taylor (1989) and her colleagues have pointed out, individuals do not see themselves objectively.

- *Advertising implication:* The implication is obvious: include personal references in advertising and other marketing communication. Moreover, given our tendency to see ourselves in a positive light, it follows that memories related to ourselves will be seen in a self-enhancing light. This suggests that copy asking people to remember a situation in a positive light should encourage an egocentric memory bias, e.g.: 'remember when you ...'. In the same way, egocentric bias can result from exaggerating the difficulty of past experiences: 'remember how hard it was to ...'. This idea is well illustrated in a campaign for National Rail's Senior Railcard, where a dated-looking picture of a young child is featured, with headlines like 'Remember what it was like to go somewhere for the first time' and 'Remember how it felt just to let yourself go'.

THE SIN OF PERSISTENCE

Research has shown that emotionally charged experiences are better remembered than less emotional occasions. The sin of persistence involves remembering things you wish you would forget, and it is strongly associated with one's emotional experiences.

- *Advertising implication:* Emotionally-charged information automatically attracts attention; and even in the briefest exposure, the emotional significance of it will be retrieved from nondeclarative emotional memory, and evaluated as to how that information will be encoded. Understanding the emotional associations generated by specific advertising is critical. Because people are more likely to remember the central focus of emotionally arousing information rather than peripheral details,

it is essential to tie the brand in marketing communication to the appropriate emotion. Otherwise, it will become peripheral to the information conveyed (a problem with a lot of highly entertaining advertising).

There is evidence that persistence thrives in negative emotional situations such as disappointment, sadness and regret. One's memory of traumatic experiences is persistent, and while these unwanted memories may occur in any of the senses, *visual* memories are by far the most common. Research reported by Ochsner (2000) supports this idea. He found that when people recognise a positive visual image they tend to just say it is familiar to them. But when they recognise negative visual images, people relate detailed, specific memories of what they thought and felt when they were originally exposed to the picture.

- *Advertising implication:* All of this underscores the importance of the visual images in advertising and other forms of marketing communication. Because persistence thrives in a negative emotional climate, if advertising illustrates disappointment or problems dealing with a situation, which is resolved by using the brand, this should tap into any persistent memories of product dissatisfaction (always assuming such dissatisfaction). It also suggests that for appropriate product categories (especially those reflecting high-involvement informational decisions such as medical or other insurance, financial planning, and so forth) visual 'reminders' of past problems which could be avoided with a brand should be an effective strategy. Such a strategy should also be equally effective in situations where there is strong psychological risk involved, e.g. reminding young people of a social 'disaster' which would never occur if they used our brand.

The root of much of this kind of activity is centred within the amygdala, the source of nondeclarative emotional memory. It is the amygdala that regulates memory storage, and can release hormones that can 'force' us to remember an experience vividly (LeDoux 1996). And as we have already noted, this response by the amygdala is much more likely to occur for negative than positive experience.

- *Advertising implication:* For appropriate product categories, it could make sense to create situations in advertising that suggest possible threats to the receiver's wellbeing. This 'threat' may then

well intrude upon active memory when thinking about the category, with our brand linked to avoiding the trouble. This is well illustrated in a recent advert for Imitrex, an ethical drug for migraine, that uses the headline 'I can't let a migraine call the shots ... that's why I use Imitrex'.

SUMMARY

Schacter has provided us with an extremely useful framework for looking at memory problems: his seven sins of memory. Each of these 'imperfections' (in his words) has the potential for interfering with the successful processing of advertising and other marketing communication. Recent work in neurobiology, utilising the recent technology of fMRIs (functional magnetic resonance imaging) and PET scans (positron emission tomography), has shown us that our earlier understanding of memories as 'snapshots' stored away in the mind ready to be recalled is not how the brain works. Memories for objects and experiences are decomposed into a number of different parts and those parts are stored in various areas of the brain, waiting to be reassembled and 'remembered'. This underscores why memories are rarely perfect, and why they can be potentially unreliable.

As this discussion makes clear, effective communication faces a number of formidable hurdles in memory. However, forewarned with this knowledge, we are in a better position to avoid or at least minimise some of these potential problems. To help advertising communication overcome the seven sins of memory, advertisers should:

- ensure the message is carefully integrated with how a brand is understood (transcience)
- encourage elaboration of points the target is interested in remembering (transcience)
- use personal references, especially to positive memories (bias)
- imply current positive brand attitudes are of long standing (bias)
- tie brands to appropriate emotions (blocking, persistence)
- use distinctive cues not likely to be associated with other long-term memories (absent-mindedness)
- create a unique brand–benefit claim link (misattribution)
- establish links in memory to appropriate category need (absent-mindedness)

- make sure those links are well integrated with *obvious* associations to the category need (blocking)
- ensure a consistent 'look and feel' over time to encourage familiarity (absent-mindedness)
- use strong visual images to create or reinforce positive memories associated with the brand (suggestibility)
- utilise reminders of past problems that could be avoided or solved by the brand (persistence).

If these points are considered in the creation of advertising executions, one is well on the way to avoiding, or at least minimising, problems inherent in how memory works.

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