

## 4.6: Internal Influences on Consumers

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this section, students should be able to do the following:

1. *Explain* how attitudes influence the information processing element in communication.
2. *Define* the multiattribute attitude model and the elaboration likelihood model of behavior.
3. *Compare and contrast* behavioral learning theories versus cognitive learning theories.
4. *Illustrate* the memory process by relating how things are remembered and forgotten.

### Attitudes and Information Processing

An **attitude** is a predisposition to evaluate an object or product positively or negatively. The attitudes we form about a product or service will affect whether we're likely to buy that product or not. Attitudes have three components:

1. **Cognition:** our *beliefs* about a product
2. **Affect:** how we *feel* about a product
3. **Behavior:** what we intend to *do* regarding the product

### Response Hierarchies: Which Comes First?

Thinking, feeling, and doing can happen in any order. Psychologists originally assumed that we form attitudes through a fixed sequence of these three components: We first *think* about the object, then evaluate our *feelings* about it, and finally take *action*: Cognition → Affect → Behavior.

Research evidence, however, shows that we form attitudes in different sequences based on different circumstances. If we're not very involved in or don't care much about a purchase, we may just buy a product on impulse or because we remember a catchphrase about it instead of carefully evaluating it in relation to other products. In that case, action precedes feeling and thought: Behavior → Affect → Cognition.

Conversely, feelings—rather than thoughts—may drive the entire decision process; our emotional reactions may drive us to buy a product simply because we like its name, its packaging design, or the brand image that ads create. In this case, we see the product, have a feeling about it, and buy it: Affect → Behavior → Cognition.

### Dig Deeper

Subaru of America's researchers discovered that Subaru owners were extremely outspoken about their passionate feelings for their cars—that's the good news. But there was bad news too: while most consumers who didn't own a Subaru had heard of the company, very few had any strong emotional connections with the cars. In response, Subaru launched a new marketing campaign that targets car buyers who pass through three stages: the heart, the head, and the wallet. The heart stage emphasizes the love owners feel for their cars in ads that tell about taking meaningful trips together or bidding a sad farewell to an old Subaru before driving off in a new model. In the head stage, spots feature rational reasons why someone should buy a Subaru, such as the couple that decides they'd rather sell their boat than get rid of their Subaru. The final wallet stage focuses on (you guessed it) financial reasons to buy a Subaru, and this includes messages from local dealers. Aaron Baar, "New Subaru Campaign Takes Aim with Cupid's Arrow," *Marketing Daily*, April 28, 2008.

### SS+K Spotlight

SS+K worked with the Massachusetts Teachers Association to create television and radio spots that would help the public to understand the issues around education prior to the state's gubernatorial election. The ads featured actual public school students in Massachusetts schools learning in classroom settings. The voice-over recalled statistics that allowed viewers to understand the impact of their choices on the public school system. The spot wraps with a strong call to action—*vote for Deval Patrick* (who was eventually elected). What is the order of cognition, affect, and behavior in this example?

### Multiattribute Attitude Models

As you can see, attitudes are complex. Because of this complexity, researchers use **multiattribute attitude models** to explain them. Simply put, multiattribute models say that we form attitudes about a product based on several attributes of that product, our beliefs about those attributes, and the relative importance we assign to those attributes.

The decision to purchase a car like an SUV offers a good illustration of how a multiattribute model affects purchase behavior. On the one hand, the styling and stance of a particular model might evoke feelings of power, confidence, and ruggedness. The vehicle's high ground clearance and roomy back might be great for the consumer's intended camping trips. On the other hand, the brand could make the consumer ill at ease—perhaps a friend had a bad experience with that car maker. And the more rational side of a consumer might balk at the high cost and poor gas mileage. Yet the vehicle looks great, so the consumer isn't sure. And, regardless of his personal feelings about the vehicle, the consumer may also factor in social pressure: will his friends criticize him as a wasteful gas-guzzler if he buys an SUV instead of a compact hybrid? Will he buy or won't he? The decision depends on how the buyer combines and weights these positive and negative attitude components. The suspense is killing us...

### The Gift or the Wrapping? The Elaboration Likelihood Model

So what's the bottom line for advertising—is it the gift or the wrapping that counts? The research helps us understand how to design the advertising message so that it has the most influence. If we advertise to consumers who are highly involved in the purchase decision-making process, then those consumers will primarily use their *thinking* to drive the decision. Therefore, strong, rational arguments (the “gift”) will be most persuasive for them.

On the other hand, consumers who are less involved will be more influenced by the “wrapping”—the images, sounds, and feelings they see or remember about the product. For them, it may be more important that Tiger Woods endorsed the car than that it gets better gas mileage than another model.

The **elaboration likelihood model** summarizes this theory. Under conditions of high involvement, the consumer will be more likely to process the content of the message, form an attitude about it, and make a purchase decision. Under low involvement, the consumer will respond to the style of the message (an attractive package, a popular spokesperson) rather than its substance.

### Perceiving Advertising Messages

The **perception process** refers to the sensory stimuli (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures) that enter through our sensory receptors (eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and skin). We select, organize, and interpret these sensations. Promotional messages rely on as many stimuli as possible to get our attention. When creating an advertising message, creatives choose sensory stimuli carefully so that they communicate a particular meaning and feeling. For example, certain colors (especially red) create feelings of arousal and stimulate the appetite, whereas other colors (like blue) are more relaxing.

### Sensory Marketing and Advertising Stimuli

Before a *stimulus* such as an image or sound can elicit a particular reaction in us, we first have to notice it. In today's cluttered advertising environment, that's no small feat. How can advertisers break through the clutter and get into the game?

Stimuli that differ from other stimuli around them are more likely to get noticed. Four ways to command a receiver's attention are size (bigger stimuli tend to command more attention), color that differs from its surroundings, position (right-hand page magazine ads get more attention than left-hand ones), and novelty (ads in places where you don't expect them, like walls of tunnels or restrooms).

Procter & Gamble decided to use the sense of smell to catch consumers' attention. P&G put up posters at bus stops in London for its antidandruff shampoo Head & Shoulders Citrus Fresh. The twist: passersby could get a whiff of the scent by pushing a button on the poster.

In a very different application, Miller Genuine Draft uses a label on its beers that has special optical brighteners that light up in black light. When a nightclub turns on its black lights, for example, the bottles visually pop off the shelf because the labels glow in the dark. Leah Genuario, “Sensory Packaging: Branding that Makes Sense(s)” *Flexible Packaging* 9, no. 7 (2007): 12.

### Subliminal Advertising

What is the hidden message in that magazine ad you're looking at? Are you getting brainwashed by innocent-looking TV commercials that “order” you to buy a product? If you believe advertisers are doing their best to place “secret messages” all around you, you're not alone. **Subliminal perception** is a topic that has captivated the public for more than fifty years, despite the fact that there is virtually no proof that this process has *any* effect on consumer behavior. Another word for perceptual threshold is *limen* (just remember “the secret of Sprite”), and we term stimuli that fall below the limen *subliminal*. So subliminal perception (supposedly) occurs when the stimulus is below the level of the consumer's awareness.

A survey of American consumers found that almost two-thirds believe in the existence of subliminal advertising, and more than one-half are convinced that this technique can get them to buy things they do not really want. They believe marketers design many advertising messages so the consumers perceive them unconsciously, or *below* the threshold of recognition. For example, several authors single out beverage ads as they point to ambiguous shapes in ice cubes they claim are actually women's bodies or erotic words. Most recently, ABC rejected a Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) commercial that invited viewers to slowly replay the ad to find a secret message, citing the network's long-standing policy against subliminal advertising. KFC argued that the ad wasn't subliminal at all because the company was telling viewers about the message and how to find it. The network wasn't convinced—but you should be.

Like this KFC ad, most examples of subliminal advertising that people “discover” are not subliminal at all—on the contrary, the images are quite apparent. Remember, if you can see it or hear it, it's *not* subliminal; the stimulus is above the level of conscious awareness. Nonetheless, the continuing controversy about subliminal persuasion has been important in shaping the public's beliefs about advertisers' and marketers' abilities to manipulate consumers against their will.

Although some research suggests that subliminal messages can work under very specific conditions, this technique has very little applicability to advertising even if we wanted to resort to it. For one, an advertiser would have to send a message that's very carefully tailored to each individual rather than to a large audience. In addition, there are wide individual differences in threshold levels (what we're capable of consciously perceiving); for a message to avoid conscious detection by consumers who have low thresholds, it would have to be so weak that it would not reach those who have high thresholds.

However, a new study surely will add fuel to the long-raging debate. The researchers reported evidence that a mere thirty-millisecond exposure to a well-known brand logo can in fact influence behavior; specifically the study found that people who were exposed to a quick shot of Apple's logo thought more creatively in a laboratory task (mission: come up with innovative uses for a brick) than did those who saw the IBM logo. Apple will no doubt love the implication, but most other advertisers are too focused on efforts to persuade you when you're aware of what they're up to.

## Learning and Memory for Advertising

Subliminal messages aside, the reality is that consumers have to remember the name of a product or recognize it on the shelf if they are to buy it. Snappy lyrics, unusual colors, or a distinctive logo can help consumers remember. Using a spokesperson like a talking gecko for the similar-sounding GEICO insurance company may be unique and visually appealing enough to make it memorable.

## Learning

**Learning** is a relatively permanent change in behavior caused by experience. The learner need not have the experience directly; we can also learn by observing events that affect others. Robert A. Baron, *Psychology: The Essential Science* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1989). We learn even when we don't try: Consumers recognize many brand names and they can hum many product jingles, for example, even for products they themselves do not use. We call this casual, unintentional acquisition of knowledge **incidental learning**.

Theories of learning range from those that focus on simple stimulus-response connections (*behavioral theories*) to perspectives that regard consumers as solvers of complex problems who learn abstract rules and concepts as they observe others (*cognitive theories*). Basic learning principles are at the heart of many advertising efforts.

## Behavioral Learning Theories

**Behavioral learning theories** assume that learning takes place as the result of responses to external events. For example, if a song we remember fondly from high school gets repeatedly paired with a brand name, over time our warm memories about the tune will rub off onto the advertised product. This process works even when the product's name initially has no meaning at all—think about the likes of Marlboro, Adidas, and Exxon, which we have learned to respond to with strong emotions.

According to this perspective, the feedback we receive as we go through life shapes our experiences. Similarly, we respond to brand names, scents, jingles, and other marketing stimuli because of the learned connections we form over time. People also learn that actions they take result in rewards and punishments; this feedback influences the way they will respond in similar situations in the future. Consumers who receive compliments on a product choice will be more likely to buy that brand again, but those who get food poisoning at a new restaurant are not likely to patronize it in the future.

## Learning about Brands

What's more, the reactions we learn to one object tend to transfer to other, similar objects in a process psychologists term **stimulus generalization**. That explains why a drugstore's bottle of private brand mouthwash deliberately packaged to resemble Listerine mouthwash may evoke a similar response among consumers, who assume that this me-too product shares other characteristics of the original. Indeed, consumers in one study on shampoo brands tended to rate those with similar packages as similar in quality and performance as well.

Stimulus generalization is the basic idea underlying numerous branding strategies that share this approach: (1) Create a brand name that consumers learn to associate with positive qualities; (2) paste that brand name on other, reasonably similar products; (3) stand back and let the positive associations transfer to the new item.

This approach explains the success of these branding strategies:

- *Family branding*. Many products capitalize on the reputation of a company name. Companies such as Campbell's, Heinz, and General Electric rely on their positive corporate images to sell different product lines.
- *Product line extensions*. Marketers add related products to an established brand. Dole, which we associate with fruit, introduced refrigerated juices and juice bars, whereas Sun Maid went from raisins to raisin bread.
- *Licensing*. Companies often "rent" well-known names. Christian Dior licenses the designer's name to products from underwear to umbrellas.

## Cognitive Learning Theories

According to the behavioral learning perspective, to a large extent the same principles that animal trainers use to teach dogs to dance (i.e., rewarding some movements with a treat while discouraging others with a loud no) operate to condition our preferences for brands. OK, it's a little insulting—but the sad truth is it's often true!

Of course (you respond indignantly), many things we learn are far more complex than a simple association between a stimulus and a response—and many powerful ads succeed because they tell complicated stories or convey abstract meanings. In contrast to behavioral theories of learning, **cognitive learning theory** approaches stress the importance of internal mental processes. This perspective views people as problem solvers who actively use information from the world around them to master their environments. Supporters of this view also stress the role of creativity and insight during the learning process.

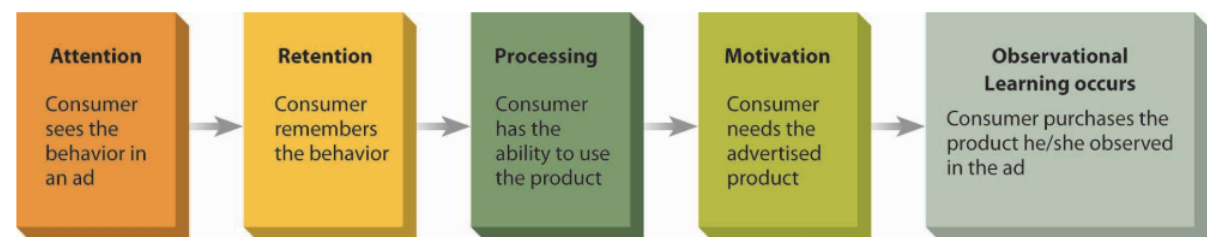


Figure 4.9 Observational Learning

One important aspect of a cognitive learning perspective is **observational learning**; this occurs when people change their own attitudes or behaviors simply by watching the actions of others—learning occurs as a result of *vicarious* rather than direct experience. This type of learning is a complex process; people store these observations in memory as they accumulate knowledge, perhaps using this information at a later point to guide their own behavior. **Modeling** (not the kind Tyra Banks does) is the process of imitating the behavior of others. For example, a woman who shops for a new kind of perfume may remember the reactions her friend received when she wore a certain brand several months earlier, and she will mimic her friend's behavior with the hope of getting the same feedback. You should have no trouble thinking of advertisements you've seen that encourage you to model an actor's behaviors at a later point in time. Try teaching *that* to a lab rat.

## How Do We Remember What We've Learned?

The most exciting advertisement is worthless if it doesn't make a reasonably lasting impact on the receiver. So, advertisers need to understand how our brains *encode*, or mentally program, the information we encounter that helps to determine how we will remember it (if we do at all). In general, we have a better chance of retaining incoming data we associate with other information already in memory. For example, we tend to remember brand names we link to physical characteristics of a product category (e.g.,

Coffee-Mate creamer or Sani-Flush toilet bowl cleaner) or that we can easily visualize (e.g., Tide detergent or Mercury Cougar cars) compared to more abstract brand names.

The encoding process is influenced by the type of meaning we experience from a stimulus. Sometimes we process a stimulus simply in terms of its **sensory meaning**, such as the literal color or shape of a package. We may experience a feeling of familiarity when, for example, we see an ad for a new snack food we have recently tasted. In many cases, though, we encode meanings at a more abstract level. **Semantic meaning** refers to symbolic associations, such as the idea that NASCAR fans drink beer or that cool women have Asian-inspired koi designs tattooed on their ankles.

Advertisers often communicate these kinds of meanings through a **narrative**, or story. For example, in 2006 SS+K created television spots for the New York Knicks basketball team that featured some of the biggest Knicks fans, including film director Spike Lee, talking about the current state of the team, as well as lifelong Knicks fans who share fond memories of past glories.

Much of the social information we acquire gets represented in memory in story form, so constructing ads in the form of a narrative can be a very effective technique to connect with consumers. Narratives persuade people to construct mental representations of the information they view. Pictures aid in this construction and allow for a more developed and detailed mental representation.

## Types of Memory

Psychologists distinguish among three distinct types of memory systems, each of which plays a role in processing brand-related information:

1. **Sensory memory** permits storage of the information we receive from our senses. This storage is very temporary; it lasts a couple of seconds at most. For example, a woman walks past the perfume counter in a department store and gets a quick, aromatic whiff of Brit for Women by Burberry. Although this sensation lasts only a few seconds, it is sufficient to allow her to consider whether she should investigate further. If she retains this information for further processing, it passes into short-term memory.
2. **Short-term memory (STM)** also stores information for a limited period of time, and it has limited capacity. This is similar to *working memory in a computer*; it holds the information we are currently processing. Our memories can store verbal input *acoustically* (in terms of how it sounds) or *semantically* (in terms of what it means). We store it when we combine small pieces of data into larger *chunks*. A chunk is a configuration that is familiar to the person and that she can think about as a unit. For example, a brand name like Glow by JLo can be a chunk that summarizes a great deal of detailed information about the product.
3. **Long-term memory (LTM)** is the system that allows us to retain information for a long period of time. Information passes from STM into LTM via the process of **elaborative rehearsal**. This means we actively think about the chunk's meaning and relate it to other information already in memory. Advertisers sometimes assist in the process when they devise catchy slogans or jingles that consumers repeat on their own. So, "don't leave home without it," "just do it," or "let your fingers do the walking."

## How Do We Store Information in Memory?

It's important to understand how we store all of the massive amounts of information we retain in our minds. Just like a really disorganized "filing cabinet from hell," our memories about brands (not to mention everything else we know) are useless if we don't know where to find them. Advertisers can structure their communication to make it more likely that subsequent messages will call up the knowledge of a brand we've already absorbed.

A popular perspective on this process is an *activation model* of memory, which proposes that each incoming piece of information in LTM is stored in an **associative network** that contains many bits of information we see as related. Each of us has organized systems of concepts relating to brands, manufacturers, and merchants stored in our memories; the contents, of course, depend on our own unique experiences.

Think of these storage units, or *knowledge structures*, as complex spider webs filled with pieces of data. Incoming information gets put into nodes that link to one another. When we view separate pieces of information as similar for some reason, we chunk them together under some more abstract category. Then we interpret new incoming information to be consistent with the structure we have created. This helps explain why we are better able to remember brands or merchants that we believe "go together"—for example, when Juicy Couture rather than Home Depot sponsors a fashion show.

A marketing message may activate our memory of a brand directly (for example, by showing us a picture of it), or it may do so indirectly if it links to something else that's related to the brand in our knowledge structure. If it activates a node, it will also activate other linked nodes, much as tapping a spider's web in one spot sends movement reverberating across the web. Meaning

thus spreads across the network, and we recall concepts, such as competing brands and relevant attributes, that we use to form attitudes toward the brand. Researchers label this process *spreading activation*.

## How Do We Access Our Memories?

**Retrieval** is the process whereby we recover information from long-term memory. Each of us has a vast quantity of information stored in our heads (quick: What team won last year's Super Bowl? Who is the current "American idol"?), but these pieces of data may be difficult or impossible to retrieve unless the appropriate cues are present.

Individual cognitive or physiological factors are responsible for some of the differences we see in retrieval ability among people. Some older adults consistently display inferior recall ability for current items, such as prescription drug instructions, although they may recall events that happened to them when they were younger with great clarity. Other factors that influence retrieval are situational; they relate to the environment in which the message is delivered.

Not surprisingly, recall is enhanced when we pay more attention to the message in the first place. Some evidence indicates that we can retrieve information about a *pioneering brand* (the first brand to enter a market) more easily from memory than we can for *follower brands*, because the first product's introduction is likely to be distinctive and, for the time being, has no competitors to divert our attention. In addition, we are more likely to recall descriptive brand names than those that do not provide adequate cues as to what the product is.

Of course, the nature of the ad itself also plays a big role in determining whether we'll remember it. We're far more likely to remember spectacular magazine ads, including multipage spreads, three-dimensional pop-ups, scented ads, and ads with audio components. Here are some other factors advertisers need to remember:

- *State-dependent retrieval*. We are better able to access information if our internal state is the same at the time of recall as when we learned the information. If, for example, we recreate the cues that were present when the information was first presented, we can enhance recall. That's why Life cereal uses a picture of "Mikey" from its commercial on the cereal box, which facilitates recall of brand claims and favorable brand evaluations.
- *Familiarity*. Familiarity enhances recall. Indeed, this is one of the basic goals of marketers who try to create and maintain awareness of their products. However, this sword can cut both ways: Extreme familiarity can result in inferior learning and recall. When consumers are highly familiar with a brand or an advertisement, they may pay less attention to the message because they do not believe that any additional effort will yield a gain in knowledge.
- *Salience*. The **salience** of a brand refers to its prominence or level of activation in memory. As we have already noted, stimuli that stand out in contrast to their environments are more likely to command attention which, in turn, increases the likelihood that we will recall them. This explains why unusual advertising or distinctive packaging tends to facilitate brand recall.
- *Novelty*. Introducing a surprise element in an ad can be particularly effective in aiding recall, even if it is not relevant to the factual information the ad presents. In addition, *mystery ads*, in which the ad doesn't identify the brand until the end, are more effective at building associations in memory between the product category and that brand—especially in the case of relatively unknown brands.
- *Pictorial versus verbal cues*. Is a picture worth a thousand words? Indeed, we are more likely to recognize information presented in picture form at a later time. Certainly, visual aspects of an ad are more likely to grab a consumer's attention. In fact, eye-movement studies indicate that about 90 percent of viewers look at the dominant picture in an ad before they bother to view the copy. But, while ads with vivid images may enhance recall, they do not necessarily improve comprehension. One study found that television news items presented with illustrations (still pictures) as a backdrop result in improved recall for details of the news story, even though understanding of the story's content did not improve.

## What Makes Us Forget?

Marketers obviously hope that consumers will not forget about their products. However, in a poll of more than thirteen thousand adults, more than half were unable to remember any specific ad they had seen, heard, or read in the past thirty days. How many can you remember right now? Clearly, forgetting by consumers is a big headache for marketers (not to mention a problem for students when they study for exams!).

Why do we forget? Some memories simply fade with the passage of time; they *decay* as the structural changes learning produces in the brain simply go away. But most forgetting is due to **interference**; as we learn additional information, it displaces the earlier information. Because we store pieces of information in associative networks, we are more likely to retrieve a meaning concept when it's connected by a larger number of links. As we integrate new concepts, a stimulus is no longer as effective to retrieve the



old response. These interference effects help to explain why we have trouble remembering brand information. Since we tend to organize attribute information by brand, when we learn additional attribute information about the brand or about similar brands, this limits our ability to activate the older information.

### Key Takaway

A major objective of advertising is to create or modify customers' attitudes toward an idea, product, or service. Advertisers need to be aware of the complex mental processes that relate to this process. These include the factors that determine how we perceive and make sense of external stimuli, how we learn about them, and whether or not we will remember them.

### EXERCISES

1. List and briefly describe the three components of attitude. Think of an ad that might illustrate each of the three categories.
2. Take any common product that you have recently purchased and relate that purchase to the response hierarchy described in this chapter section. Which response hierarchy most closely matches your purchase?
3. Create an example involving a low involvement product versus a high involvement product to illustrate the Elaboration Likelihood Model. Explain how your example matches this model.
4. Compare and contrast the behavioral learning theory model with the cognitive learning theory model. Which model seems to be most applicable to the learning process in consumer behavior? Why?

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