

Priming

The activation of specific concepts in memory for the purposes of influencing subsequent behaviors.

Whenever stimuli are received by the senses—sights, sounds, smells, touches, tastes—concepts are automatically activated in memory. Once concepts are activated, they stay activated for a period of time, capable of influencing subsequent thoughts, reactions, emotions, and behaviors. For example, in a classic experiment on the effects of priming, two groups of college students were given a series of written language tests. The language test for one group included words related to politeness, and the language test for the other group included words related to rudeness. Subjects were instructed to complete the test, and then go down the hall and find the test administrator to get instructions for their next task. When each student completed his or her test and went down the hall, the student found the test administrator engaged in a conversation with another person. Unbeknownst to the students, the real test regarded whether the students would interrupt the conversation, or wait politely until the conversation ended. The results were dramatic: 63 percent of the students primed with words related to rudeness interrupted, whereas only 17 percent primed with words related to politeness interrupted. Exposure to words related to politeness made people more polite, and exposure to words related to rudeness made people ruder.¹

Priming is an effective means of influence when the stimulus introduced activates concepts that are consistent with a preexisting need or goal. For example, showing an image of a person drinking soda before a movie would have an effect on thirsty people, inducing more of them to buy soda than would otherwise, but it would have no effect on nonthirsty people. However, since everyone in the audience shares the goal of wanting to see a good movie, showing positive imagery and movie previews will prime the audience to react more favorably to the movie generally than they would otherwise. It is this latter kind of indirect prime—the prime that is unnoticed—that is the most effective. When viewing a typical advertisement, the audience knows there is an attempt at influence, and they may consciously counteract it. By contrast, when the students in the experiment were primed for rudeness or politeness, there was no obvious direct link and no conscious awareness of the manipulation. If you told them why they were being so rude or so polite, they would respond with incredulity.

Consider priming in all aspects of design. First impressions, contexts, and antecedent events are all opportunities to influence subsequent reactions and behaviors—this includes the way products are presented in packaging, the articles adjacent to advertisements in newspapers, and the experiences leading from the parking lot to the entryway of a retail store. Favor indirect primes over direct primes, as the former tends to be more persistent and leaves no trace.

See also Cathedral Effect, Expectation Effect, and Exposure Effect.

¹ The seminal work on priming as it pertains to influence is “Automaticity of Social Behavior: Direct Effects of Trait Construct and Stereotype Activation on Action” by John Bargh, Mark Chen, and Lara Burrows, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1996, vol. 71(2), p. 230–244. See also “Losing Consciousness: Automatic Influences on Consumer Judgment, Behavior, and Motivation” by John Bargh, *The Journal of Consumer Research*, Sept. 2002, vol. 29(2), p. 280–285.

Psychologists at Newcastle University observed that staff members using an honor system coffee station often did not contribute money when they drank the coffee. As psychologists are inclined to do, they decided to run an experiment. For ten weeks they alternately taped two posters over the coffee station. The first poster featured a generic image, and the second poster featured staring eyes.

The results were striking: When the poster with the eyes was displayed people contributed almost three times more money than they did when the poster with the generic image was displayed. Whether people consciously noticed the poster or not, the eyes in the poster activated regions of the brain that regarded being watched, increasing the sense of accountability and, by extension, the coffee fund.

