

# LITTLE LUXURIES

BIGGER ISN'T BETTER – UNLESS YOU'VE GOT A LOT ON YOUR MIND. **BRONWEN MORGAN** DELVES INTO A NEW ACADEMIC PAPER ON UNIT PRICE PERCEPTION



They say good things come in small packages, and it would appear that the science world agrees: research to date has shown that people assume products in smaller packages to be of a better quality. A team of researchers recently set out to understand why that might be.

"Results from several studies show that a product in a smaller package is rated more favourably than the equivalent product in a larger package", write Professors Denfeng Yan, Jaideep Sengupta and Robert S Wyer Jr, in their latest paper. But, they say, the mechanisms behind this effect have, until now, received little investigation.

The scientists believe that this judgement could be linked to the concept of unit price – that is, the price per unit volume of a product. Previous research has demonstrated that people tend to take a higher overall price to be an indication of greater product quality, even if other product attributes are identical. In one study, for example, consumers were given exactly the same beer labelled with different prices, and rated those bottles labelled with the higher price as being of a higher quality.

But Yan and his colleagues point out that this study, and others like it, don't distinguish between the effect of overall price and that of unit price. As an illustration, they point out that while a large bottle of low-quality shampoo may carry a higher overall price than a much smaller bottle of high-quality shampoo, the unit price is likely to be higher for the smaller bottle.

## COGNITIVE LOAD

To understand whether the perception of unit price is indeed driving the quality ratings of products, the researchers carried out a series of experiments.

One involved subjects judging the quality of potato crisps, as well as estimating their cost, having been led to believe they came in either a large or small pack. It found that the crisps were judged to be tastier if participants thought they had come from a smaller pack. What's more, while the total cost of the bigger package was judged to be higher, the unit cost was estimated as being lower. This directly links the idea of higher quality with higher unit cost.

Interestingly, however, it seems this effect all but disappears if only the overall

price is provided and consumers are unable to calculate the unit price easily. In another study, Yan and his colleagues asked research participants to sample some orange juice (again telling them it came from either a big or small carton), but only provided the overall price (though unit cost had been implicitly manipulated).

Participants were also asked to memorise either a two- or eight-digit figure while they made their judgements. Those with the lower cognitive load (memorising only a two-digit number) made the usual association between higher unit cost and quality. But those with the higher cognitive load of memorising an eight-digit number judged the juice from a larger carton as being of a better quality.

The team took this result to mean that overall price is likely to be used as an indicator of quality under "cognitively taxing conditions that restrict processing". When consumers are unencumbered however, the unit price cue prevails.

'Package size and perceived quality: The intervening role of unit price perceptions' is published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

## 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 Krishna 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 Krishna'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 Frish 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 smell 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 perception, judgement and behaviour' can be found in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

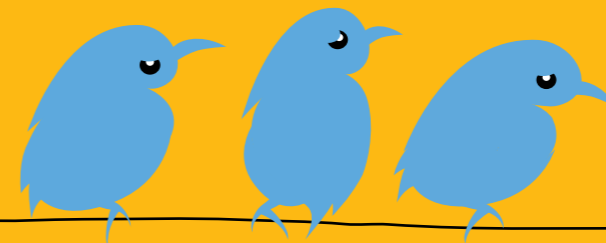
## NEGATIVE SENTIMENT

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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## INTO THE HABIT

**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 ([bit.ly/19H4n4l](http://bit.ly/19H4n4l)) 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 ([bit.ly/1dYKsIJ](http://bit.ly/1dYKsIJ)). 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 behavioural habits, think about the habit loop and identify the trigger and reward. And remember that cementing habits takes time.

A study conducted by Phillippa 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 ([bit.ly/bfSJXK](http://bit.ly/bfSJXK)). ■

**Crawford Hollingworth** is co-founder of **The Behavioural Architects**



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