

Selling the Unseen

Subliminal stimuli in marketing

Subliminal perception is the ability of our minds to process data and stimuli that our conscious may not have noticed. For decades, advertisers have experimented and tested the possibility of using subliminal stimuli to manipulate the spending patterns of consumers. There have been several major studies carried out since the 1950s into subliminal advertising. Here are several of the studies into the use of the subliminal in advertising.

James Vicary 1957

James Vicary was a marketing expert working in the late 50s. Vicary claimed that by adding the words "THIRSTY? DRINK COKE" and "HUNGRY? EAT POPCORN" to a movie, only appearing for a single frame, that the sales of Coke and popcorn both increased drastically.



Del Hawkins 1970

Hawkins showed a group of volunteers a short piece of film that had the word "COKE" flash up on screen for 2.7 Milliseconds. He claimed that this caused the group to become thirsty, and when given a choice of drinks after the film, many chose Coke. However Hawkins would repeat this experiment in 1989 with Sharon Beatty, and their replications of the experiments came up negative. Both Hawkins and Beatty believed that 2.7 MS is simply too short of a time for the brain to process a subliminal message.



Karremans, Stroebe and Claus 2006

More modern research into the use of subliminal advertising has been more focused on its limitations. A group of volunteers watched a video containing subliminal messages for Lipton's Iced Tea. Some of the volunteers had been given salty snacks before the tape, and they seem to be the most affected by the subliminal messages getting even thirstier and choosing an Iced tea over water.

How does subliminal advertising work?

Subliminal advertising works by exposing stimuli intended to persuade you to make a purchase. While we have mostly focused on subliminal stimuli in moving image, there are other methods of subliminal persuasion. These include methods like shops using scents to persuade you to buy expensive food items, or by using subliminal ideas to reinforce loyalty to the brand.

References

- Beatty, S. and Hawkins, D., 1989. Subliminal Stimulation: Some New Data and Interpretation. *Journal of Advertising*, 18(3), pp.4-8.
- Hawkins, D., 1970. The Effects of Subliminal Stimulation on Drive Level and Brand Preference. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 7(3), p.322.
- Karremans, J., Stroebe, W. and Claus, J., 2006. Beyond Vicary's fantasies: The impact of subliminal priming and brand choice. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 42(6), pp.792-798.
- Smarandescu, L. and Shimp, T., 2014. Drink coca-cola, eat popcorn, and choose powerade: testing the limits of subliminal persuasion. *Marketing Letters*, 26(4), pp.715-726.