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## Smiles Really DO Boost Sales

Fri, Oct 26, 2007

[Neuromarketing](#), [Neuroeconomics](#), [Neuroscience Research](#)



What's the first thing a manager teaches a new retail or food service employee? Maybe "Don't steal the cash!" is first, but right after that is, "Smile at the customer!" It turns out that this is probably even better advice than one might think. Continuing our exploration of subliminal stimuli and their effects on behavior, I wanted to share an intriguing study that shows that exposure to brief images of smiling or frowning faces – **too quickly for the subject to consciously process** - actually affected the amount test subjects were willing to pay for a drink!

It's not difficult to imagine a positive, smiling staff member selling more, on average, than a scowling one. But a [study](#) done a few years ago by Piotr Winkielman of the University of California San Diego and Kent C. Berridge of the University of Michigan showed that even subliminal smile images could have a significant effect. The researchers showed subjects a picture of a "neutral" face – neither smiling or unsmiling – for a little less than half a second. That's long enough to recognize the face and identify its gender, which is what the subjects were supposed to do. The researchers also inserted a very brief image of a smiling or scowling face. This image was shown for only 16 milliseconds – too short to register consciously.

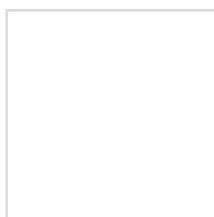
In both studies, conscious feelings were not influenced by subliminal presentation of emotional faces, regardless of whether participants rated their feelings on a simple scale from positive to negative mood or from high to low arousal, or on a multi-item scale asking about specific emotions, such as contentment or irritation. That is, participants did not feel more positive after subliminally presented happy expressions than after subliminally presented neutral expressions. Nor did they feel more negative after angry expressions than after neutral expressions. Yet participants' consumption and ratings of the drink were influenced by those subliminal stimuli – especially when participants were thirsty. Specifically, thirsty participants poured significantly more drink from the pitcher and drank more from their cup after happy faces than after angry faces (Study 1). **Thirsty participants were also willing to pay about twice as much for the drink after happy than after angry expressions (Study 2).** The modulating role of thirst indicates that unconscious emotional reactions acted through basic biopsychological mechanisms that determine reactions to incentives, such as a drink, rather than through cognitive mechanisms influencing interpretation of the stimulus. *[Emphasis added]*

The authors call this phenomenon “**unconscious emotion,**” referring to the fact that an apparent emotional change has occurred with the subject being aware of neither the stimulus that caused it nor the shift in his emotional state.

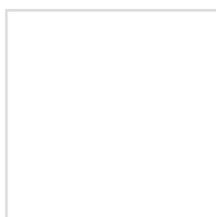
How can marketers use this knowledge? Flashing smiling subliminal images at customers waiting to be served at a burger restaurant doesn't seem very practical, or very ethical for that matter. I think the study does show that even a tiny elevation of mood, so small that it is imperceptible to the subjects, could affect their spending. This means that the manager who trains her employees to smile is on the right track. It also suggests that imagery in the purchase area should be positive and people should be smiling.

Another implication is that, once again, market researchers should be very cautious when asking people to describe their emotional state. The research showed significant behavioral effects even when the subjects did not note any change in their emotions. That was a theme of my recent Neuromarketing presentation at the Infopresse Market Research conference in Montreal – there are many, many reasons why asking people questions fails to disclose what's really happening in their brain.

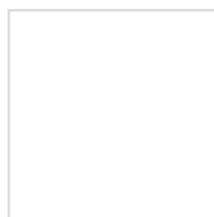
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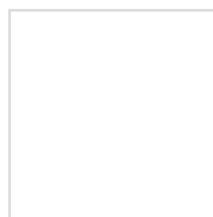
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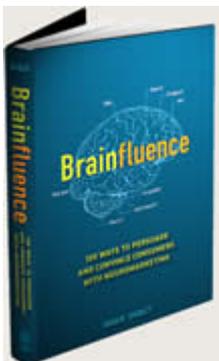
**This post was written by:**



[Roger Dooley](#) — who has written 888 posts on [Neuromarketing](#).

Roger Dooley writes and speaks about marketing, and in particular the use of neuroscience and behavioral research to make advertising, marketing, and products better. He is the primary author at [Neuromarketing](#), and founder of [Dooley Direct LLC](#), a marketing consultancy. Follow him on [Twitter](#).

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3 responses to "Smiles Really DO Boost Sales" — [Your Turn](#)

}



[david](#) 27. October 2007 at 8:27 pm

People respond to smiles (positive) much better than frowns (negative). We all want to have a positive life so having positive interactions is a good way to increase sales.

[Reply](#)



Dan [29. October 2007 at 7:24 pm](#)

It's interesting that you write "flashing smiling subliminal images at customers... doesn't seem very practical, or very ethical for that matter."

If subjects were aware of the shift in their emotional state, would it then be ethical? If so, why is that the dividing line? Is it because they can then presumably take into account and compensate for their elevated mood when making the purchase decision? Who actually does that? Isn't tweaking emotions tweaking emotions, regardless of whether the emotion breaks the surface, so to speak?

I am fascinated by the issues addressed on your blog, but I feel like the more we learn about the neurological basis for decision making and how little rationality is involved, the murkier these ethical waters become.

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[30. October 2007 at 7:54 am](#)

I agree, Dan, it's a murky area. Most people would agree that embedding messages like "buy more Pepsi" in a subliminal manner would be too manipulative. But a smile? Particularly when it seems to be a mood enhancer? Don't we all want to be a little happier, and should we object if someone helps us along that path, even subliminally?

And of course, what's actually subliminal? We may not be aware of quiet background music, but that, too, might have a mood effect.

Roger

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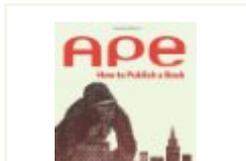
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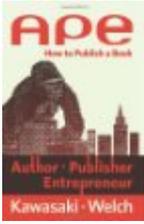


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