

*decode Research Update*

## Choice Blindness

What can we really tell from consumers' decisions?

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# Welcome to the decode research update

It seems like the most natural thing in the world: if we want to know which packaging variant will be the most successful, how important different product features are and how they should be developed, or how convincing a new ad is then why not ask those in the target market?

Behind this lies the assumption that customers are clear about their decisions and can voice their opinions. However, as Richard Nisbett, a Professor of Psychology, remarked in 1977(!), "our research showed that people have little, or no, introspective access to their decisions".

Recent studies into so-called 'choice blindness' have got to the bottom of this phenomenon and have shed light on what people really know about their decisions – with exciting implications for Marketing.

We hope you enjoy reading this research update.

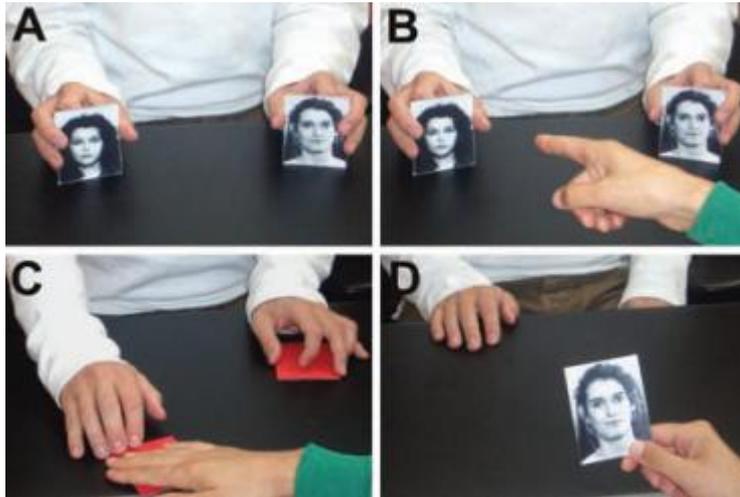
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# Choice Blindness

Let's look at a typical experiment in this area of research. Test subjects are shown two photos of different people and asked to decide which one they think is the more attractive. They are then handed the photo they picked and asked to justify their decision. The catch? The photos were switched before being handed over, so the subject got the photo of the person they *didn't* choose. One would expect the subjects to have then noticed the switch....



You can see a BBC report on this experiment here;  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRqyw-EwgTk>

Test subjects had to pick which of two peoples' photographs they found more attractive (A or B). They were then handed the supposed card of the preferred photograph (C) and asked to justify their decision. Actually, they were handed the other card ie showing the photo that they hadn't picked.

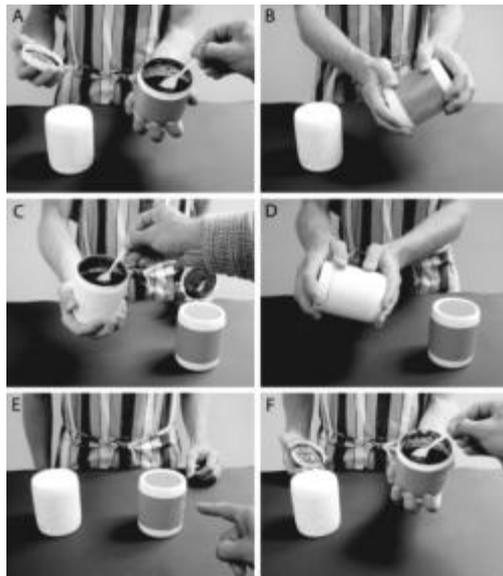
75% of participants didn't notice the switch – and subsequently gave a detailed explanation justifying their choice.

According to the article published in *Science*, 75% of participants did not notice that the photos had been switched! What's more, they then gave detailed and elaborate explanations for why they found the person more attractive – even though they were talking about the photo they had previously claimed was less attractive.

Let's look more closely at this, because this experiment illustrates a fundamental principle of human decision-making which has important implications for Marketing.

# Choice Blindness in Marketing

In a recently-published paper in the journal *Cognition*, scientists studied whether choice blindness only occurred when looking at faces or whether there was a more general effect. This time, instead of faces, test subjects were shown product ranges of jams and teas in a supermarket. Again, they were asked to choose which one looked best (tastiest) and were asked to confirm their decisions having tried the products. Like in the previous experiment, their choices were switched without them knowing. On average, only 20% of the participants noticed the switch! This was even the case with very different varieties like Bitter Grapefruit vs Apple & Cinnamon. Subjectively, the subjects were very sure that they could clearly distinguish between varieties – and, again, they gave detailed accounts to justify their judgements. What does this mean for day to day Marketing management – don't you rely on asking people for their opinions and evaluations?!



This film shows the jam experiment;

<http://www.youtube.com/user/ChoiceBlindnessLab>

Subjects had to taste two varieties of jam at a time (for example, redcurrant vs blueberry) (A). The containers, however, held both types of jam, one at each end. As soon as a subject had tasted a variant, the container was surreptitiously turned upside down (B, C, D). The subjects then had to say which variety they preferred (E). Finally, this variety was tasted again (F) and the choice confirmed.

Because the containers had been turned upside down, the subjects actually tasted and confirmed their preferences for the variety that they had previously rated as worse.

# Consequences for day to day Marketing (1)

Behaviour instead of opinion.

The first implication from these insights into choice blindness is that we should observe actual behaviour, rather than rely on the motivations people claim for their behaviour.

According to a study by one American consultancy, we in Marketing should give up advertising because the majority of those consumers who they asked(!) stated that they weren't affected by it. But it's long been known that people are unable to describe, or explain, the effect of influences, for example advertising, on their behaviour. Nevertheless, we persist in asking them.

If we want to determine the effectiveness of different 'touch points' (eg advertising, packaging, web) on sales, we must look at exactly how consumers use them. We cannot simply ask, 'how important is advertising / packaging / website to you when thinking about buying'? because, as choice blindness confirms, people are, for the most part, 'blind' about their own decisions. Richard Nisbett describes it thus in his paper;

**Evidence is reviewed which suggests that there may be little or no direct introspective access to higher order cognitive processes. Subjects are sometimes (a) unaware of the existence of a stimulus that importantly influenced a response, (b) unaware of the existence of the response, and (c) unaware that the stimulus has affected the response. It is proposed that when people attempt to report on their cognitive processes, that is, on the processes mediating the effects of a stimulus on a response, they do not do so on the basis of any true introspection.**

One way to get around this lack of introspection is to use Implicit measurement. More about that in a future research update.

## Consequences for day to day Marketing (2)

### Increasing relevance and involvement in surveys

The research into choice blindness also shows us that when we decide on, or have to justify, something that isn't that important to us our answers quickly become arbitrary and unreliable. If something is important to us, however, we tend to notice even small differences. If it's not relevant to us, or if a relevant context for the decision is missing, then up crops choice blindness – but only then. In day to day Marketing, we often find that both relevance and context are missing from surveys. So what does that mean?

Consumers buy products in order to attain certain functional and psychological goals – without this context, consumer opinion is mostly of little significance. To increase the validity of survey responses we must ensure that the questions are as relevant as possible, and that the respondents are as involved as possible. One way to do this, for instance, would be to always state explicitly what concrete goal can be attained by using the product or pack – because little is more relevant for the brain than the accomplishment of a goal. If we want to reposition our product range using a new pack design, it's important to integrate the (functional or psychological) goal in each question about the product. Instead of asking, 'which body lotion would you rather buy?', it's better to ask, 'which body lotion would you rather buy *if you want daily skin care*'? or 'which body lotion would you rather buy *if you want to pamper and spoil yourself*'?

## Further reading:

Hall, L., Johansson, P., Tärning, B., Sikström, S., & Deutgen, T. (im Druck). Magic at the Marketplace: Choice blindness for the taste of jam and the smell of tea. *Cognition*.

Johansson, P., Hall, L., Sikström, S., & Olsson, A. (2005). Failure to Detect Mismatches Between Intention and Outcome in a Simple Decision Task. *Science*, 310, 116-119.

Nisbett, R., & Wilson, T. (1977). Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes. *Psychological Review*, 84, 231-259.

Grunert, K. G. (2003). Can we understand consumers by asking them? I: *Marketing Research*. 15, 2.

Mueller, S. et al. (2009). What you see may not be what you get: Asking consumers what matters may not reflect what they choose. *Marketing Letters*. P. 1-16.