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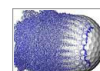
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New Theory: How Advertisers Get Inside Your Head

By **Jeanna Bryner, Senior Writer**

posted: 17 December 2008 08:23 am ET

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Even with the recession, people are doing their holiday shopping and ads are playing a big role in steering them toward one product versus another.

A new theory suggests how the ads can work on our unconscious mind to spur purchases.

Scientists have long known that when we see a product repeatedly, our initial response is to want that object, and then after lots of visual exposure to the object, through [advertisements](#) or other means, our preference for it dwindles.

Now cognitive scientist Mark Changizi of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in New York thinks he knows why this phenomenon occurs. The bottom line is we're [rational creatures](#), at least in this case. And the [unconscious mind](#) is constantly weighing the cost of attaining an item against that object's value or benefit.

His theory is detailed in a recent issue of the journal *Perception*.

Changizi gives an example of how the process worked in our earlier evolutionary minds: Say you saw a "shiny object" flit by in the forest. Your preference for that object should increase, because the fact that you saw it means you might be able to grab it. But if you were to notice thousands of these shiny objects just lying around, your desire for it would plummet. The thinking goes, with so many lying around, the object must not be too valuable or else others would have hoarded the objects for themselves.

All this cost-benefit analysis happens unconsciously. And advertisers can cash in on this [animalistic tendency](#) of ours: By flashing ads of a product, advertisers can make our minds think that product is easy to get, and thus worth the effort of trying to get it.

Changizi's theory also explains why advertisements that don't reach our conscious brain work best. Basically, our conscious mind and its conscious judgments can butt in and override any unconscious, and more animalistic, programs.

"When you consciously see [the object], then the judgment about how easy it is to get is both on the basis of this guttural animalistic thing but also on your conscious judgments," Changizi told *LiveScience*.

For example, advertising that takes the form of apparel branded with companies' names, and products strategically placed in movies and television shows, often goes unnoticed by consumers, capitalizing on our brain's cost-benefit mechanisms.

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