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How Whole Foods "Primes" You to Shop

by Martin Lindstrom
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Have you ever been primed? I mean has anyone ever deliberately influenced your subconscious mind and altered your perception of reality without your knowing it? Whole Foods Market, and others, are doing it to you right now.

Derren Brown, a British illusionist famous for his mind-reading act, set out to prove just how susceptible we are to the many thousands of signals we're exposed to each day. He approached two creatives from the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi for the "test." On their journey to his office, Brown arranged for carefully placed clues to appear surreptitiously on posters and balloons, in shop windows, and on t-shirts worn by passing pedestrians.

Upon their arrival, the two creatives were given 20 minutes to come up with a campaign for a fictional taxidermy store. Derren Brown also left them a sealed envelope that was only to be opened once they'd presented their campaign. Twenty minutes later, they presented and then opened the envelope. Lo and behold, Derren Brown's plans for the taxidermy store were remarkably similar to the ad campaign, with an astounding 95% overlap.

An interesting experiment, you may say, but hardly a trick you'd fall for. But bear this in mind — it's more than likely you were well primed the last time you went shopping.

Let's take for example Whole Foods, a market chain priding itself on selling the highest quality, freshest, and most environmentally sound produce. No one could argue that their selection of organic food and take-away meals are whole, hearty, and totally delicious. But how much thought have you given to how they're actually presenting their wares? Have you considered the carefully planning that's goes into every detail that meets the eye?

In my new book "Brandwashed," I explore the many strategies retailers use to encourage us to spend more than we need to — more than we intend to. Without a shadow of doubt, Whole Foods (Nasdaq: WFM - News) leads the pack in consumer priming.

Let's pay a visit to Whole Foods' splendid Columbus Circle store in New York City. As you descend the escalator you enter the realm of a freshly cut flowers. These are what advertisers call "symbolics" — unconscious suggestions. In this case, letting us know that what's before us is bursting with freshness.

Flowers, as everyone knows, are among the freshest, most perishable objects on earth. Which is why fresh flowers are placed right up front — to "prime" us to think of freshness the moment we enter the store. Consider the opposite — what if we entered the store

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and were greeted with stacks of canned tuna and plastic flowers? Having been primed at the outset, we continue to carry that association, albeit subconsciously, with us as we shop.

The prices for the flowers, as for all the fresh fruits and vegetables, are scrawled in chalk on fragments of black slate — a tradition of outdoor European marketplaces. It's as if the farmer pulled up in front of Whole Foods just this morning, unloaded his produce, then hopped back in his flatbed truck to drive back upstate to his country farm. The dashed-off scrawl also suggests the price changes daily, just as it might at a roadside farm stand or local market. But in fact, most of the produce was flown in days ago, its price set at the Whole Foods corporate headquarters in Texas. Not only do the prices stay fixed, but what might look like chalk on the board is actually indelible; the signs have been mass-produced in a factory.

Ever notice that there's ice everywhere in this store? Why? Does hummus really need to be kept so cold? What about cucumber-and-yogurt dip? No and no. This ice is another symbolic. Similarly, for years now supermarkets have been sprinkling select vegetables with regular drops of water — a trend that began in Denmark. Why? Like ice displays, those sprinkled drops serve as a symbolic, albeit a bogus one, of freshness and purity. Ironically, that same dewy mist makes the vegetables rot more quickly than they would otherwise. So much for perception versus reality.

Speaking of fruit, you may think a banana is just a banana, but it's not. Dole and other banana growers have turned the creation of a banana into a science, in part to manipulate perceptions of freshness. In fact, they've issued a banana guide to greengrocers, illustrating the various color stages a banana can attain during its life cycle. Each color represents the sales potential for the banana in question. For example, sales records show that bananas with Pantone color 13-0858 (otherwise known as Vibrant Yellow) are less likely to sell than bananas with Pantone color 12-0752 (also called Buttercup), which is one grade warmer, visually, and seems to imply a riper, fresher fruit. Companies like Dole have analyzed the sales effects of all varieties of color and, as a result, plant their crops under conditions most ideal to creating the right 'color.' And as for apples? Believe it or not, my research found that while it may look fresh, the average apple you see in the supermarket is actually 14 months old.

Then there's those cardboard boxes with anywhere from eight to ten fresh cantaloupes packed inside each one. These boxes could have been unpacked easily by any one of Whole Foods' employees, but they're left that way on purpose. Why? For that rustic, aw-shucks touch. In other words, it's a symbolic to reinforce the idea of old-time simplicity. But wait, something about these boxes looks off. Upon close inspection, this stack of crates looks like one giant cardboard box. It can't be, can it? It is. In fact, it's one humongous cardboard box with fissures cut carefully down the side that faces consumers (most likely by some industrial machinery at a factory in China) to make it appear as though this one giant cardboard box is made up of multiple stacked boxes. It's ingenious in its ability to evoke the image of Grapes of Wrath-era laborers piling box after box of fresh fruit into the store.

So the next time you happen to grab your wallet to go shopping, don't be fooled: retailers for better or for worse, are the masters of seduction and priming — brandwashing us to believe in perception rather than reality.

Martin Lindstrom is a 2009 recipient of TIME Magazine's "World's 100 Most Influential People" and author of "Buyology: Truth and Lies About Why We Buy" (Doubleday, New York), a New York Times and Wall Street Journal best-seller. His latest book, "Brandwashed: Tricks Companies Use to Manipulate Our Minds and Persuade Us to Buy," will be released in September.

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