

Activating explicit, implicit memory encoding

 By [John Laurence](#)

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A recent UCLA psychology study found that people often do not recall things they have seen hundreds of times. In the study, 54 people who worked in an office building were asked whether they knew of the location of their nearest fire extinguisher, but only 13 (24%) were able to correctly identify the location. But when asked to find a fire extinguisher, in other words to physically locate it, they were all able to do so quickly.

This works on even a more familiar level. If you wear an analogue watch, cover the face without looking at it. Now try to remember if the figures are shown in Roman numerals or normal numbers. A surprisingly large number of people can't do this - even though they regularly look at their watch on a daily basis.

When I go to pick up a few groceries I will make a note to pick up whatever items I need, such as eggs, milk and bread. I don't however make a list of the brands that I am going to purchase. I will go into the store, look at the options available and more than likely choose the brand I always do. This will be the brand that is most salient at the time; the one that just feels right. I never bother to put any thought into it or spend time analysing the various cost versus benefit of each option. Quite frankly, as I write this I couldn't tell you the brand of the items that I usually purchase, although I know I purchase the same ones most of the time.

Is advertising not working?

Research often asks a respondent to recall certain aspects of an advertisement in aided or spontaneous recall questions. A certain amount of them may be able to do so, but if they can't, does that mean the advertising is not working?

Memory works on both an implicit (subconscious) as well as explicit (conscious) level. Many of the memory structures you get by on everyday are not available to your conscious mind. Have you ever had difficulty remembering your PIN number when having to consciously recall it rather than just punching it in?

Some TV advertising is expected to make you remember facts, but more often it is trying to influence the saliency of the brand in a particular situation. So being able to write down where your fire extinguisher is while sitting in your office (semantic memory) is not as important as being able to quickly locate it when you see flames leaping out of the smoker's balcony (procedural memory).

Are you able to analyse exactly which aspects of an advertisement are activating memory encoding on both an explicit as well as implicit level? If not, you are missing out on a big part of the picture.

ABOUT JOHN LAURENCE

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