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NOSTALGIA MAKES US MORE PATIENT

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Want to make customers more willing to wait? Create a nostalgic experience for them, a new study by CUHK Business School suggests.

Imagining that you have been waiting for 10 to 20 minutes to be seated at a restaurant during lunch time and you have started feeling a bit irritated. Suddenly, you spot something that helps you recall a happy experience in the past and you find yourself more willing to wait. Why is that the case? How does nostalgia make us more patient?

This issue was explored in a study¹ conducted by Prof. Robert Wyer, a visiting professor at the Department of Marketing of the Chinese University of Hong Kong Business School, and his collaborator Irene Huang Xun, an assistant professor at the Nanyang Technological University, as well as Tak Huang Zhongqiang, a postdoctoral researcher at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. They find that nostalgia would increase people's tolerance for waiting.

According to the researchers, nostalgia, a sentimental longing for the past, is a nearly universal phenomenon. It can serve a variety of functions. As shown in previous research, nostalgia can counteract the feeling of loneliness, boredom and anxiety. It can motivate social interaction, making people more tolerant of outsiders. As such, companies are using nostalgia more often than ever in marketing. For example, McDonald's and Coca Cola once jointly launched a campaign in which they gave away old-style Coca Cola glass bottles, leading consumers to reminisce their childhood memories.

“The prevalence of nostalgic marketing campaigns call for research on how nostalgia can influence consumer behavior,” says Prof. Huang, who obtained her PhD degree at Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) Business School in 2013.

“The beneficial functions of nostalgic memories are typically driven by the content of these memories. However, we wonder whether the process of recalling and thinking about a nostalgic experience can have different effects. ”

In the study, the researchers propose that nostalgia, which is induced by recalling a cherished experience that is unlikely to reoccur, disposes people to savor this experience by prolonging the time they reminisce about them, and the tendency to savor these experiences would generalize to situations that participants encounter later, thus increasing their tolerance for waiting.

In other words, the research team suggests that by inducing a motive to savor the past or recalling a nostalgic experience could influence how patiently consumers wait for products or services in an unrelated situation.

KEY EXPERIMENTS

To test the hypothesis, the team conducted eight experiments that looked at how nostalgia made people more patient in various contexts, including anticipating a large but delayed reward, waiting for a web page to download, waiting for a purchased item to be delivered, and waiting for long-term health benefits.

In one experiment, eighty undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: nostalgia and ordinary. In the nostalgia condition, participants were asked to recall a past event in which they felt nostalgic about it by writing about it. In the ordinary condition, participants were asked to write about an ordinary event in their life. Afterwards, all participants were told that they would enter a lucky draw and that if they won, they could choose one out of two rewards: a payment of about US\$14 that could be collected immediately, and a payment of about US\$22 collected in one month. The choice of the large delayed reward reflects a willingness to wait.

As expected by the researchers, the results show that 93% of the participants in the nostalgia condition chose the large-but-delayed reward, whereas 64.9% of them in the ordinary condition chose it. That is to say, participants in the nostalgic condition were more likely to choose the large-but-delayed reward than the ordinary participants.

“The results of this experiment clearly demonstrated that feeling nostalgic can actually increase people’s patience,” Prof. Huang comments.

What’s more, the effects of nostalgia on consumer patience were also evident in a real marketing setting.

Ninety patrons who had been waiting between 10 and 20 minutes to be seated at a restaurant were approached by a research assistant during lunch time or dinner time. They were asked to participate in a survey of dining behavior. Respondents who agreed to participate were given a file folder containing the questionnaire on the right and a piece of gray-colored paper on the left. For participants in the nostalgia condition, the phrase, “Nostalgia – Memories of our good old days” was placed in the middle of the gray-colored paper, whereas for those in the ordinary group, this phrase was omitted.

Then all participants were asked to estimate how long they had been waiting to be seated. All the participants indicated that they had not kept track of exactly how much time had passed since they started to wait, thus the responses they gave were based on their best estimates. Obviously, shorter perceived waiting time reflects greater patience in waiting.

The results showed that averagely, the patrons who had been exposed to the nostalgic stimulus with the phrase "Nostalgia - Memories of our good old days" estimated that they had waited for 5.80 minutes, as compared to the shorter time (i.e., 8.33 minutes) estimated by those who had not been exposed to it. Hence, the result indicated that the former was more patient than the latter.

"This shows that feeling of nostalgia leads participants to become more patient when waiting," Prof. Huang adds.

According to her, recalling a desirable experience that will not reoccur motivates individuals to savor their memory for the experience and prolong their reminiscence of it. This motive, in turn, activates a more general disposition to prolong experiences that generalizes to situations that participants encounter later, consequently increasing their tolerance for having to wait for the occurrence of events in these situations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETERS

Given that the findings suggest that when consumers are incidentally feeling nostalgic, they are more likely to prefer large delayed options to small options that are immediately available, the researchers believe that marketers can actually benefit from using nostalgia if they wish to encourage the purchase of options that are not available at the time. For example, supermarkets with an intention to keep customers shopping in the facility may take advantage of nostalgic music or decorations. On the contrary, fast-food restaurants may want to avoid playing nostalgic music.

Moreover, the evidence that nostalgia can be induced by features of an ad as well as by pre-consumption experiences has implications for marketers who want to decrease negative reactions that result from a long waiting time. For example, a restaurant with long lines of customers waiting may benefit by playing nostalgic background music. Similarly, a telecommunications company that takes a long time to deliver new models of cell phones may also benefit from applying a nostalgic theme in the promotion campaign in order to alleviate the negative outcomes of waiting.

However, the researchers also point out that when people perceive a nostalgic experience to be repeatable or when they intensify their memory of the experience rather than prolonging it, the relationship between nostalgia and consumer patience would be diminished.

Reference:

[1]Xun (Irene) Huang, Zhongqiang (Tak) Huang and Robert S. Wyer JR., Slowing Down in the Good Old Days: The Effect of Nostalgia on Consumer Patience, Journal of Consumer Research, Volume 43, Issue 3