
Institute for Research in Marketing

Press Release

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CARLSON
SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT
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Feeling Blue? University of Minnesota Study Finds New Insight to Predicting Consumer Emotions

MINNEAPOLIS / ST. PAUL – It’s no secret that emotions influence peoples’ decisions about what, when and how they buy. Whether choosing between a movie and a play, deciding whether to attend a sporting event shortly before an important event or selecting an indulgent breakfast treat in anticipation of a tough day at work, consumers’ choices are often guided by how they expect their purchase will make them feel. New research by Jane Ebert, a professor of marketing at the University of Minnesota’s Carlson School of Management, reveals that how we go about predicting our emotions can lead to very different outcomes.

In a series of four studies, Ebert and co-authors Daniel Gilbert (Harvard) and Timothy Wilson (University of Virginia) use methods of prediction called forecasting and backcasting to show how they lead to quite different outcomes. Consumers can predict their feelings following an event by forecasting—first imagining their feelings when the event occurs (“I’ll be very unhappy if I see the Red Sox lose today”) and then considering how those feelings might change over time (“...but I’ll probably feel better in a few days, in time for my birthday party”). Alternatively, they can predict their feelings following an event by backcasting—first imagining their feelings in a future period (“I’m going to be happy in a few days because my birthday party is coming up”) and then considering the effects of the event (“...and if I see the Red Sox lose today it won’t change that much”).

For example, a person who sees an ad for a Caribbean Cruise in the dead of winter would expect to enjoy the trip more if the copy read, “Winter getting you down? How’s it going to feel after three more weeks of this? Wouldn’t a sun-filled tropical vacation help? Book one today,” than if the ad simply touted the trip before invoking the customer’s feelings. By first getting buyers to think ahead to more winter, the advertisement actually makes them consider the effects of the vacation on their feelings *more* than if they just think about the vacation.

People make a lot of decisions based on how they expect their choices to make them feel. “We found that we can easily change a consumer’s expectations of those feelings,” said Ebert. The differences in the information that forecasters and backcasters consider and the predictions that they make suggest that simply changing the order in which consumers think about a potential consumption event and how they expect to feel in the future can markedly change expectations about their feelings as a result of the event.

Jane Ebert’s teaching and research focuses on understanding how marketers and policy-makers can increase the influence of consumers’ future goals (such as good health and a comfortable retirement) on their current decisions and behavior. The paper "Forecasting and Backcasting:

Predicting the Impact of Events on the Future," forthcoming in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, and more information on Professor Ebert can be found at www.carlsonschool.umn.edu/marketinginstitute/jebert.

The Institute for Research in Marketing is part of the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota. Established in 2005, the Institute fosters innovative, rigorous research that improves the science and practice of marketing. More information can be found at www.carlsonschool.umn.edu/marketinginstitute.

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