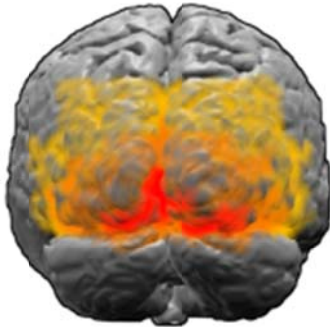


6 Primes that increase your conversion

Sabina Idler | October 25th, 2011

Do you believe to be an empowered Internet user? You use the Internet as a source for information and your decisions are solely based on this information and your own conviction? If you answer this question with “yes, absolutely”, I’m sorry to have to tell you, that you might not be quite as empowered as you think. No one is.



“The extrastriate cortex (shown in orange and red) is believed to be involved in perceptual priming” ([wikipedia](#))

For example, I get trapped a lot by thinking I better purchase a product online to avoid persuasive sales men that would say anything to increase their personal revenue. On the Web, I can choose between several sources of information, I can compare prizes, and read comments by other customers. This way, I believe to focus my buying decision only on the quality of the purchase. In this post I’d like to shed light on how concrete and peripheral cues on the Web influence our judgement and decisions – and how you can use priming to increase your own conversion.

What Priming is

[Priming](#) describes the exposure to a stimulus which activates mental pathways. In a later point of time, when these pathways are still active, they are more easily accessible for a similar stimulus than non active ones. This leads to a priming effect. To make this more clear, take a minute and think of something that has lately kept you busy. I’m sure you will see that the topic has popped up at several occasions, also when you did not expect it. This is because certain mental pathways are activated in your mind and whenever you come across anything that dogs to any of these pathways, you automatically follow the pathway back to the original thought.

Another nice example are television advertisements. By watching an ad, different mental pathways are activated. Usually these pathways only link to positive memories (that’s what ad designers get payed for). The next time that you go to the supermarket and you see the product from the ad, these positive memories are triggered which leaves you with a positive attitude

towards the product. Perfect right? If I need to choose one of the hundred different yogurt brands, I most likely decide for the one that gives me positive feelings.

There are two different kinds of priming, which are commonly used in the marketing sector to influence people's judgement about other people or products: categorical, and feature priming.

- **Categorical priming:** Judgement is influenced by previously activated information. Hypothetically, people who are primed with very expensive products, judge a product they are exposed to at a later point of time cheaper than people who have not been primed.
- **Feature priming:** Judgement is influenced by activating the accessibility to certain features. These features are then weighted more heavily than others. Primed features are perceived by consumers as more salient than others.

Why Priming works

Priming effects work unconsciously. If we are aware of being influenced in any way, we refuse the persuasive influence and by doing so, we can weaken the effects. If we are not aware of it, we perceive primes as our own ideas and priming effects become decisions based on our knowledge and personal judgement.

When confronted with a decision, we usually don't, or more precisely can't consider all aspects involved. Instead, we rely on knowledge we already have. We retrieve information from memory, while memories that are more easily accessible than others are also more likely to be retrieved ([source](#)).

Through priming, information in our memory is temporarily made accessible, which makes it likely that we use this information for the interpretation and judgement of a follow up stimulus. Priming can influence any decision making process, such as the judgment of our own happiness, the hostility of someone else, or the expensiveness of a car.

Everyone can be primed

Basically, priming works for everyone. We are all people, and we all function about the same, right? We constantly need to make decisions and we never have the time to look into every aspect that might influence this decision. So what we do, we rely on what we know, or at least what we think we know, and base our decisions on that. However, there are two different groups of people that respond differently to primes. These are experts and novices of a given field. Both groups can be influenced by primes, but we need to be aware that they process them differently.

Experts already have a lot of accessible knowledge and they can distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information. They base their decisions on memory rather than on external cues. Experts use primes to verify their knowledge and search for information in their own memory. Primes can be used to activate the right memories.

Novices on the other hand don't have a lot of foreknowledge and are more receptive for external information. Especially feature priming can be used to influence their decisions. Imagine you don't know a lot about cameras and you are about to buy one. You are more likely to be influenced by a great, new feature than an expert, who knows that technically the feature can't keep it's promises, right?

6 Primes that increase your conversion

You have several options to include primes on your website. These primes can influence your customers' judgement about you, your company, or the products you offer. Primes can influence the choices your customers make and consequentially the actions they take. So starting with a positive attitude, over the choice of a product, to the successful purchase of the same, priming can be an effective tool to guide your customers through your website. Priming does not work by forcing a decision upon your customers, but you can effectively support their decisions.

Primes that can be used to guide your customers and support their decisions are:

1. Colors

Colors have different meanings and can be used to prime emotions. You can e.g. color your background or only specific elements like buttons or content areas. Beware of your target group and their understanding of colors.

2. Text

Of course you can use text as prime. For example, include the exact wording of your menu items in your content and build a nice story around them. When customers look around your site, the primed menu item will lead their thoughts back to your story which makes elements of the story accessible.

3. Metaphors

Use metaphors which refer to information that help your customers make a decision. For example, imagine you try to sell vacation trips. You could use the metaphor of a shell to trigger positive emotions like sun, beach, palm trees, relaxation, etc.

4. Pictures

Use pictures to prime your customers. These pictures can either be in the background or a central element of your page. You can e.g. prime emotions that come with the purchase of your product. Or you prime a desirable action that requires the purchase of your product. Both times, you trigger memories, that might only be distantly related to your product, to guide your customers' decisions.

5. Videos

Use videos to prime e.g. a whole process of actions. For example showing the sign up process with the different steps involved, will make it more easy for your customers to sign up. Different memories related to a sign up process will be accessible that help to make the right choice. Besides, when your customers sees the sign up button, the process of signing up will be more accessible to them than without the prime.

6. Audio

Include audio on your website to prime any action you want your customers to engage in. Make sure to not tell your customers what to do, but give them the idea they figured it our themselves.

Make sure you pay attention to the atmosphere on your website. The emotional perception and elements that refer to emotions are important primes when it comes to the perception of your site. For the rest, be creative! Anything that activates information in your customers minds can be used as prime.

Ethical considerations

Be honest, while reading this post, have you thought something like: “Hey, this reminds me of subliminal messaging”? Even though the two are related, subliminal messaging includes ‘hidden’ primes and is, as I believe, unethical. Subliminal primes also trigger our memories, but people have no chance to identify the source of influence. Besides, not much research can be found to prove that subliminal messaging really works.

Priming on the other hand has been proven multiple times to influence our judgment and decision making and is a recognized marketing tool. Priming includes visual or at least sensible primes that can be identified, such as pictures or odors. These primes should be context sensitive and e.g. part of your design. Primes influence our choices, but they support our decision making processes instead of forcing a decision upon us. However, primes only work if they are not identified as such, which I guess, offers material for discussions. The fact that almost everything in our economic environment can be identified as prime, leaves us with the following question: When is it ethical to prime people for marketing reasons? Please feel free to leave comments and share your own opinion on priming.

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