

For Immediate Release: January 26, 2009

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Remember That Time? New Study Demystifies Consumer Memory

If a vacation starts out bad and gets better, you'll have a more positive memory than if it starts out good and gets worse—if you're asked about it right afterward, according to a new study in the [*Journal of Consumer Research*](#).

In the study, authors Nicole Votolato Montgomery (College of William and Mary) and H. Rao Unnava (Ohio State University) set out to broaden our understanding of how people evaluate past sequences of events, such as vacations.

“How consumers arrive at an overall retrospective evaluation of such experiences that contain a variety of distinct incidents is important to understand because it not only reflects consumers' enjoyment of the experience, but it also impacts a consumer's intent to purchase similar experiences in the future,” write the authors.

In two studies, researchers had participants read scenarios detailing a recent 7-day vacation that included numerous events. Some read about a vacation that started awfully and ended up fantastic, and others read the opposite scenario. Participants were asked to indicate how likely they were to purchase a similar vacation, how much they would pay, and which events they recalled.

Much depended on when people were asked to evaluate an experience, the authors discovered. When asked to assess an experience immediately following it, participants based their evaluations on the events that occurred at the end of the experience, because they were better able to remember the final events. After a period of time had elapsed, people weighted early events more heavily because they couldn't remember final events as well.

“Consumers exhibit a preference for experiences that improve over time versus worsen over time when evaluations are assessed immediately, and they prefer the reverse when evaluations are assessed following a delay,” write the authors.

“Our findings suggest that marketers may engineer experiences to maximize customer enjoyment by improving the most memorable events. For long-term customer enjoyment, marketers should attempt to make consumers' initial experiences with a service or product very positive,” conclude the authors.

Nicole Votolato Montgomery and H. Rao Unnava. “Temporal Sequence Effects: A Memory Framework.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: June 2009.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

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