

Psychological Biases Can Also Make People More Receptive to New Information

For some, improving diet quality may require eating different foods or changing methods of preparation. Experimental research finds that specific cues can significantly influence individuals' expectations of how a new product will taste and, thus, how likely individuals are to try new foods and recipes. These cues may include appearance, name, price, brand, or information and descriptions given by others (Tuorila et al., 1998; Cardello and Sawyer, 1992). Subsequently, expectations can bias an individual's actual postconsumption opinion of taste and overall experience. Experiments show that individuals who think an item will taste good give higher post-trial evaluations compared with those who expected the same item to taste bad (Tuorilla et al., 1998; Cardello and Sawyer, 1992).

Cardello and Sawyer (1992) told groups of subjects that they would be sampling a brand of juice from a new tropical fruit. Each group except one was told that the juice had been taste-tested previously and subjects had either "liked it very much," "disliked it very much," or "neither liked nor disliked it," depending on treatment group. Subjects' expectations about the juice correlated very closely with the information provided by the researchers. Groups whose members had expected a bad experience reported a lower level of acceptance than groups whose members had expected a good experience. This is a phenomenon called "confirmation." In fact, subjects' expectations about the overall experience tended to bias their post-trial analysis of taste sensations (like sweetness) that had not been mentioned in the pre-taste information. Despite biasing evaluations, it appears that discovering that food is not what was described reduces one's willingness to try the food again (Tuorila et al., 1998).

Individuals have been found to be significantly influenced by who gave them information about a product. Manufacturers and retailers have long known the power of word-of-mouth advertising. Smith (2004) also argues that many notions as to what is good or acceptable are determined in the first few years of life. This leads marketers of foods to frequently show images of young children who are happy presumably because they have consumed the marketers' food products.

People seek social validation by trying to fit in and are more likely to be persuaded by people they consider to be likable (Cialdini, 2001). Not surprisingly, that is why people who are considered popular and trustworthy figures are often used to tout the virtues of a product, rather than more infamous people. Promoters have now taken this one step further. It is now becoming increasingly popular among product promoters to actually seek out young adults or teenagers to act as "trend setters" who will be able to spread the word about a product among their peers (Walker, 2004).

In terms of providing nutrition education with school meals programs, FSP, and WIC, this suggests that who delivers the message and how satisfied he or she appears to be while doing so may have more of an impact than simply providing information about how and why to make more healthful food choices.