

Process Versus Outcome Thought Focus and Advertising

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Recent social psychological research demonstrates that certain types of mental simulations are particularly useful for helping individuals reach the things they envision (e.g., Taylor, Plana, Rivlin, & Armer, 1998). More specifically, Taylor's (1998, 1999; Taylor et al., 1998) recent research indicates that the most successful simulation focus on the process of achieving a goal rather than on the resources or outcomes of the goal. In this article, we extend simulations of persuasive versus outcome-focus and thought in advertising. In studies manipulating the focus of participants' thoughts while viewing a print advertisement, we find that process-focused thought results in significantly higher behavioral intentions than an outcome-focused thought when advertisement arguments are strong. However, in the case of weak advertisement arguments, process-focused thought actually lowers behavioral intentions compared to thoughts focusing on the end result or outcome of product usage. Thus, in addition to increasing the persuasive power of strong advertising claims, process-focused thinking appears to make individuals better or more discerning consumers who do not form behavioral intentions when it is inappropriate to do so.

In the popular press, self-help writers commonly advise people to simulate favorable outcomes and consequences to motivate successful achievement of individual goals (e.g., Penning, 1991; Paula, 1992). Some examples include visualizing one's self enjoying the benefits of losing or attaining one's financial goals or simulating one's self making the free throw shot that wins the basketball game (as opposed to imagining practicing free throw shots). Advertising also encourages consumers to simulate favorable outcomes of using products. A recent television advertisement for a luxury automobile was filmed from the driver's seat. The car is stopped at an intersection with a car next to it. The announcer says, "Imagine this is your only chance to make an impression. What type of impression would you like to leave?" In another advertising campaign, the California lottery encourages consumers to "Watch a little

dream" of how they would spend their millions, were they to win. In these advertisements and many others, marketers encourage viewers to imagine positive outcomes of product usage.

Thus, in both the self-help domain and advertising, most instructions to simulate appear to focus on the enjoyment of achieved positive outcomes—on "eyes on the prize" focus. Recent research in social psychology, however, indicates that by focusing on the processes involved in goal-directed activities rather than on favorable outcomes, people are better able to achieve their goals (see the discussion of process-focused thoughts and its implications for the self-help literature provided in Taylor, Plana, Rivlin, & Armer, 1998). The purpose of this article is to explore the distinction between outcome- and process-focused mental simulations as a possible tool for designing persuasive advertisements. In applying this research to the advertising domain, we extend current literature on process-focused mental simulation by demonstrating that the strength of a persuasive communication moderates the effect of simulation type (process vs. outcome) on behavioral intentions.

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