

Need a new brand name? Think of your vowels, says new research

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A simple shift in a vowel's sound can change the way people think and make decisions about objects – leading to a greater connection between a brand's name and product features a business wants to highlight, says new research from UTSC and UTM.

"When you see a table, you call it a table and know what to expect," says Sam Maglio, an assistant professor in UTSC's Department of Management. "But since there's no such reference for a new product, businesses need to find an engaging brand name that attracts consumers and helps them make sense of what they're buying. We found vowel sounds can achieve that."

The study looked at two different types of vowel sounds, defined by the highest point the tongue lands in the mouth as the sound is said. "Front vowel" sounds such as those in bee or bay, are made with the tongue forward, while the tongue is to the rear of the mouth with "back vowel" sounds such as but or boot.

"Previous work has shown that cross-culturally, people associate front and back vowel sounds with specific expectations," says Maglio. "Front sounds are matched with notions of sharpness, brightness and being small, while back sounds are associated with dullness, darkness and being large."

Maglio and the research team – which included University of Toronto Mississauga psychology post-doctoral fellow Cristina Rabaglia – found

that vowel sounds go beyond what people think about objects, for instance if they should be big or small. Vowel sound can in fact influence how people process and prioritize information to make decisions related to the object.

"These speech sounds can influence how people think," says Rabaglia. "This clarifies our psychological relationship with the fundamental building blocks of language."

"We're not talking about a big distance in your mouth, but the sounds are very psychologically salient," she says, noting that many languages make this distinction.

"Since the right [brand name](#) can make or break a new product's success, generating the best name is vital for business," says Maglio. "By using appropriate vowel sounds, you can highlight the product features you want your customers to value – leading to potentially greater consumer interest or increased sales."

The team found that when faced with back vowels, people tended to make decisions that valued the desirability of an object over its feasibility (buying a delicious food that was shelved across a store rather than a less tasty one that happened to be close at hand).

With back vowels, people preferred primary over secondary features: hand lotion that worked well but was in unattractive packaging over average lotion with pretty packaging. They also prioritized long-term over short term benefits, such as a massage that was initially painful but offered months of relief versus one that was soothing but only for a few days.

The opposite preferences occurred when people were provided with foods, lotions and massages that had front vowels in their names.

"The smallest components of words, the building blocks we use to make words, are very subtle," says Maglio. "But they're capable of changing the way we think about those named objects."

The research is published online in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

Provided by University of Toronto Mississauga

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