

Attempting to remember may hinder intuitive 'gut feeling'

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You might think that remembering a specific thing – say, the price of a can of corn – would help you when trying to make a specific determination, like if the corn costs more this week than last.

Well, it's not necessarily so.

If you can explicitly remember last week's price, that's fine, but if there's any doubt at all, you may experience a metacognitive "feeling-of-not-knowing," which can block the implicit memory people generally use to make accurate price comparisons.

"The key idea is that there is knowing, and there is the feeling-of-knowing. They are two different things," said Manoj Thomas, associate professor of marketing and director of the Business Simulation Laboratory in the Samuel Curtis Johnson Graduate School of Management.

"The feeling-of-knowing is an intuitive experience," he said. "It gives you confidence in your knowledge. ... The moment you create this feeling-of-not-knowing, it says that the information that comes up in your mind is not reliable, don't use it."

Thomas and Ellie Kyung, associate professor of business administration at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College, co-authored a study on how trying to explicitly remember can hinder one's ability to implicitly know. "When Remembering Disrupts Knowing: Blocking Implicit Price Memory" appears in the December edition of the *Journal of Marketing Research*.

Thomas and Kyung originally thought their paper would examine behavioral pricing and the effect small price changes have on sales. But while it's understood that even small adjustments can affect sales, "if you go and ask the shopper what was the price – even 10 seconds after the consumer has put the product into the cart – they can't remember," Thomas said.

So their motivation shifted from pricing to human recall: How can someone make a determination regarding price without explicitly remembering what the price used to be?

Thomas and Kyung set out to prove that attempts at "remembering" can block "knowing" through a series of six experiments. Each was made up of two parts – a shopping study in which participants were exposed to the [prices](#) of 20 grocery items, under the guise of market research, and a memory-based comparison task. Participants were not forewarned about the comparison task.

The general paradigm for their experiments: Participants are shown 20 items and their prices, then are unexpectedly shown the same items the following day but with prices that are either \$1 lower (10 items) or \$1 higher (10 items).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two tasks: simply compare the second price to the first, or recall-and-compare, where they had to remember the previous price before making the comparison.

In all experiments, the subjects' attempts at recalling specific information disrupted the accuracy of memory-based price comparisons. Participants asked to simply compare the first price to the second scored as many as 10 percentage points better in price-comparison tests than those who were asked to recall the previous price first.

The inability to recall specific information led to the feeling-of-not-knowing, which blocked participants' implicit memory. Furthermore, other experiments proved that drawing attention away from the feeling-of-not-knowing – promoting a more abstract mindset that focused on the bigger picture, the "why" as opposed to the "how" – reduced the detrimental effect of attempting to explicitly remember a fact.

What their research points to, Thomas says, is the human brain's remarkable sophistication. Even when the raw facts are impossible to bring up, implicit memory can be highly dependable.

"In memory-based judgments, recall is fragile, and it decays very fast," Thomas said. "Recognition is much more reliable."

More information: Ellie J. Kyung et al. When Remembering Disrupts Knowing: Blocking Implicit Price Memory, *Journal of Marketing Research* (2016). [DOI: 10.1509/jmr.14.0335](https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.14.0335)

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