

Now or later: How taste and sound affect when you buy

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Credit: Nate Edwards/BYU Photo

There's a reason marketers make appeals to our senses; the "snap, crackle and pop" of Rice Krispies makes us want to buy the cereal and eat it. But as savvy as marketers are, they may be missing a key ingredient in their campaigns.

New research finds the type of sensory experience an advertisement conjures up in our mind—taste and [touch](#) vs. sight and sound—has a fascinating effect on when we make purchases.

The study led by marketing professors at Brigham Young University and the University of Washington finds that advertisements highlighting more distal sensory experiences (sight/sound) lead people to delay purchasing, while highlighting more proximal sensory experiences (touch/taste) lead to earlier purchases.

"Advertisers are increasingly aware of the influence sensory cues can play," said lead author Ryan Elder, associate professor of marketing at BYU. "Our research dives into which specific sensory experiences will be most effective in an advertisement, and why."

Elder, with fellow lead author Ann Schlosser, a professor of marketing at the University of Washington, Morgan Poor, assistant professor of marketing at San Diego State University, and Lidan Xu, a doctoral student at the University of Illinois, carried out four lab studies and a pilot study involving more than 1,100 study subjects for the research, published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Time and time again, their experiments found that people caught up in the taste or touch of a product or event were more likely to be interested at an earlier time.

In one experiment, subjects read one of two reviews for a fictional restaurant: One focused on taste/touch, the other emphasized sound/vision. Participants were then asked to make a reservation to the restaurant on a six-month interactive calendar. Those who read the review focusing on the more proximal senses (taste and touch) were significantly more likely to make a reservation closer to the present date.

In another experiment, study subjects read ad copy for a summer festival taking place either this weekend or next year. Two versions of the ad copy existed: one emphasizing taste ("You will taste the amazing flavors...") and one emphasizing sound ("You will listen to the amazing sounds...").

When subjects were asked when they would like to attend, those who read the ad copy about taste had a higher interest in attending a festival this weekend. Those who read ads emphasizing sounds were more likely to have interest in attending the festival next year.

"If an advertised event is coming up soon, it would be better to highlight the more proximal senses of [taste](#) or touch - such as the food served at the event - than the more distal senses of sound and sight," Schlosser said. "This finding has important implications for marketers, especially those of products that are multi-sensory."

As part of the study, researchers also learned an interesting insight into making restaurant reviews more helpful. In their field study, the authors analyzed 31,889 Yelp reviews to see if they could find connections between the sensory elements of a reviewer's experience and the usefulness of a review.

They found reviews from people who emphasized a more distal [sense](#) (such as sight) were rated more useful when the [review](#) used the past tense ("We ate here last week and..."), while people emphasizing a proximal sense (touch) had more useful reviews when they used the present tense ("I'm eating this right now and it is so good!").

"Sensory marketing is increasingly important in today's competitive landscape. Our research suggests new ways for marketers to differentiate their products and service, and ultimately influence consumer behavior," Elder said. "Marketers need to pay closer attention to which sensory

[experiences](#), both imagined and actual, are being used."

More information: Ryan S. Elder et al, So Close I Can Almost Sense It: The Interplay between Sensory Imagery and Psychological Distance, *Journal of Consumer Research* (2017). [DOI: 10.1093/jcr/ucx070](https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucx070)

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