

Paper: Surprise can be an agent of social change

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Surprising someone -- whether it's by a joke or via a gasp-inducing plot twist -- can be a memorable experience, but a less heralded effect is that it can provide an avenue to influence people, said Jeffrey Loewenstein, a professor of business administration at the Gies College of Business at Illinois. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

A jolt of the unexpected can have far-reaching effects, according to new research from a University of Illinois expert who studies leadership and creativity.

Surprises are memorable, able to garner [attention](#) and arouse emotion, but a less heralded effect is that they can serve to shift attitudes and provide an avenue to influence people, said Jeffrey Loewenstein, a professor of business administration at the Gies College of Business at Illinois.

"There are plenty of people who think of surprise as an emotional expression," Loewenstein said. "You can easily imagine the facial expression of someone who is experiencing surprise. But surprise not only generates this emotional reaction, it also is a push to learn, and an experience that people get excited to share with others. Put those things together and surprise becomes a powerful tool for social influence."

The impulse to share a surprising experience is a common one. For example, audiences may experience it when they see a movie with a big twist at the end and immediately want to talk about it with friends. And because stories, pictures, music and more can be widely shared, the [social influence](#) of surprise can have a ripple effect, Loewenstein said.

"A big twist is a surprise, because it's something you didn't expect," he said. "It can also be a powerful emotional experience. And when you learn something that really connects with you, there's this interest in sharing it with other people. We know from prior research that if a story generates a powerful [emotional reaction](#) like awe, anger, disgust or amazement, it's more likely to be shared than if it's more of a neutral or technical piece. Surprise has that same benefit as other strong emotional experiences."

In addition to drawing our attention to new information, surprising items

also can rapidly spread through networks. The result is that surprise not only has individual effects on beliefs and attitudes, but also "collective effects on the content of culture," according to the paper.

"There's a lesson here about leveraging the unexpected," Loewenstein said. "If you tell somebody what they're expecting, then they can easily tune out what you're saying: 'There's no new information here. I already know this. It's not important for me to attend to.' But by being counterintuitive, by swerving from the well-worn path, you are telling people that there's something that you need to pay attention to."

If you're trying to get the attention of a new consumer or investor, then getting people to experience surprise by deviating from where their expectations are, "you're going to capture their attention," Loewenstein said.

"And in today's world, capturing attention is enormously important," he said. "We're in an information-rich environment where our primary challenge is how to identify what to pay attention to. And surprise, which shatters expectations, is a signal that says 'Hey! Pay attention!'"

That surprise can lead to them changing their attitude and shifting their preconceptions.

"Once you have their attention, you can then follow up the surprise with new information, which might be a different way to think about something," Loewenstein said. "That's the kind of opening you have when you surprise people. Critically, there is a second effect because you are not only making one person more open, you are also making them your ambassador. You are likely to generate word of mouth as they share the surprising experience with others. Surprise is a force multiplier for communication."

What generates surprise need not be accidental or random. According to Loewenstein, there are predictable methods or patterns, such as the repetition-break structure, for generating surprise.

"As a communicator, you can create surprise," he said. "It seems counterintuitive, because surprise seems like it ought to be a random occurrence, but you can plan surprises."

Consider the professional comedian or magician and - presto! - you have someone who is a "professional surprise engineer," Loewenstein said.

"A magician is setting up a situation where you think you're seeing most of or all of what's happening, but in fact you're not really seeing the critical bits," he said. "What's amazing is that you know when you go to see a magician perform that you're going to see something that you didn't expect - and they do it anyway.

"Crafting surprises is something everyone can learn to do, and they will be more influential if they do."

The paper was published in the journal *Topics in Cognitive Science*.

More information: Jeffrey Loewenstein. Surprise, Recipes for Surprise, and Social Influence, *Topics in Cognitive Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/tops.12312](https://doi.org/10.1111/tops.12312)

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