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Alliteration Alters: Phonetic Overlap in Promotional Messages Influences Evaluations and Choice

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Abstract

Alliteration is the repetition of initial word sounds across two or more proximal words. Alliterative pricing presentations consisting of words (brand or product names) and numbers (price and quantity information) can influence evaluations, choice, and purchase behavior. We provide evidence that alliterative pricing promotions can positively influence deal evaluations and product choice; for example, "Two T-shirts $21" elicits more positive evaluations from consumers than does "Two T-shirts $19," even though the latter pricing presentation is objectively better. We suggest phonological (word sound) overlap present in alliteration facilitates message processing, which in turn results in more positive judgments and deal evaluations and influences choice. Our findings build theory while presenting clear managerial implications for marketing communications and pricing decisions.
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Introduction

Managers at Bob's Sporting Goods are considering two promotional message options: one to save "Big Bucks at Bob's" or alternatively to save "Loads of Cash at Bob's." Might one message elicit more favorable responses from consumers relative to the other one? Although both messages convey identical information, the phonological (word sound-related) composition of each varies. With "Big Bucks at Bob's," the initial "b" sound in "big" is repeated across the adjacent words bucks and Bob's, but this repetition of initial word sound (alliteration, or word sound overlap) does not occur in the other message. We investigate how word sound overlap (hereafter, "sound overlap") may influence message processing, and ultimately product purchase. Now consider that managers also have to set the pricing for the promotion. Will "$5.00 Socks" or "$6.00 Socks" elicit better deal perceptions and lead to higher sales? While the first alternative represents an objectively better deal from a pricing perspective, would the second alternative be processed differently due to sound overlap? Again, the latter option "$6.00 Socks" is alliterative and has sound overlap (repeated initial "s" sound).

We focus on alliterative promotional messages and demonstrate a positive effect on evaluations and choice. For instance, in a small proof-of-concept field demonstration we show a "$6.00 Sundae" (alliterative) deal can be judged as better than the objectively better "$5.99 Sundae" (non-alliterative) deal. At an ice cream and Italian ice retailer, across two different Saturdays, we promoted an ice cream sundae. On the regular menu a sundae with three scoops of ice cream and two toppings sells for $6.00, additional toppings can be added for $0.75 each. The promotional sundaes had three scoops of ice cream and four toppings. The non-alliterative promotion read, "Mega Sundae $5.99" and the alliterative promotion read, "Super Sundae $6.00." These promotions represented savings of $1.51 (no alliteration) and $1.50 (alliteration). On the Saturday the non-alliterative promotion was run, sundaes accounted for 3.5% of sales, while on the Saturday with the alliterative promotion, sundaes accounted for 6.3% of sales. A Z-test of proportions confirmed that super sundaes constituted a significantly larger proportion of sales than mega sundaes ($Z = 2.063$, $p = .039$).

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In a second demonstration at the same retailer we used another pair of promotions. On the regular menu, four scoops of Italian ice sell for $4.25. The non-alliterative promotion read, "Four Scoops $3.99," while the alliterative promotion read, "Four Flavors $4.00." The promotions represented savings of $0.26 (no alliteration) and $0.25 (alliteration). The non-alliterative four scoops of Italian ice deal accounted for 23.63% of sales on the Saturday it was run. The alliterative promotion was associated with 30.46% of sales on the Saturday when it was run. A *Z*-test of proportions confirmed that the four flavor deal constituted a marginally larger proportion of sales than the four scoops deal ($Z = 1.733$, $p = .084$).

While these initial demonstrations were small in scale, they suggest a sales enhancement due to the use of an alliterative versus non-alliterative promotion is possible. Furthermore, the promotions were designed to pit alliterative promotions against those conforming to the well-known right-hand-digit effect and .99 ending prices (Mace 2012; Schindler and Kibarian 1996; Schindler and Kirby 1997). We posit alliteration positively affects promotion perceptions (compared to non-alliterative yet objectively better or equivalent deals) and provide process support for the proposed effects. We suggest this evaluative enhancement occurs because reading a particular word sound increases accessibility of words sharing the same word sound (i.e., the subsequent words in alliterative promotions), leading to a fluency effect. Furthermore, we test this relationship, and specify conditions when an alliteration effect may occur. We argue this effect occurs because alliteration aids in message processing. Our theorizing results in prescriptive rules to guide managers in their creation of promotional messages.

This research makes several important practical and theoretical contributions. First, we show a novel effect: alliteration positively affects deal perceptions (compared to non-alliterative yet objectively better or equivalent deals). From a managerial perspective, our research suggests when offering attractive promotions, managers do not always have to lower prices. Indeed, managers and consumers often equate "deals" with lower prices. In managerial contexts, offering such deals not only lower profit premiums but can also lead to price wars. Furthermore, offering price discounts also increase price sensitivity in the longer term and lowers both profits as well as brand equity (Blattberg and Neslin 1990; Mela, Gupta, and Lehmann 1997; Mela, Jedidi, and Bowman 1998; Pauwels, Hanssens, and Siddarth 2002). We offer a simple, yet actionable solution. Instead of focusing on discounting price, changing the composition of the promotional message alone can improve evaluations and affect choice.

From a theoretical perspective, pricing research has traditionally focused on how consumers judge prices and price discounts (Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal 1991; Grewal, Monroe, and Krishnan 1998; Monroe and Lee 1997; Schindler and Kibarian 1996; Schindler and Kirby 1997; Thomas and Morwitz 2005). However, these prices are rarely presented in a vacuum, they are often presented as part of a promotion. The role of the promotional message in influencing judgments of price has received little attention in the literature. An accessibility-based process for alliteration has not been documented before and may have important implications for related research and theories (e.g., perceptual fluency; Alter and Oppenheimer 2006).

Importantly, from a managerial perspective, our work demonstrates how managers can apply alliteration in real-world contexts. Our research thus contributes to not only the literature on pricing (Bagchi and Davis 2012; Thomas and Morwitz 2005), but also the role promotional messages play in influencing perceptions (Chandon, Wansink, and Laurent 2000; Darke and Chung 2005; Hardesty and Bearden 2003).

Alliteration, Sound Overlap, Fluency, and Reading Processes

By definition, alliteration is based on initial word sounds (or phonemes). For example, consider the sounds "f" and "ph" make. Even though the letters are different, "five phones" is alliterative as initial word sounds are identical. Additionally, alliteration requires words with sound overlap to be proximal. A message with several (i.e., more than two) non-overlapping words between words with sound overlap may not fit the definition of alliteration.

The use of alliteration is popular in marketing and noncommercial communications alike. We see examples of alliteration in brand names (e.g., American Airlines, Bed Bath & Beyond, Coca-Cola, Dunkin' Donuts) and commonly used figures of speech (e.g., busy as a bee, good as gold, right as rain). Newspaper headlines and advertisements are frequently alliterative (e.g., Bipartisan Budget Buoys Barack; see also Leigh 1994; McQuarrie and Mick 1993), and not surprisingly, over twenty percent of idioms in the English language are alliterative (Benczes 2013). Indeed, research on speech and writing production indicates individuals are more likely to choose or use a word exhibiting sound overlap (relative to baseline) after words they just generated or were presented (Goldinger et al. 1992; Rapp and Samuel 2002). Research also suggests that during spontaneous production of alliterative speech, the subsequent alliterative words are chosen because of increased accessibility in memory (Perfetti, Bell, and Delaney 1988). Stated differently, when individuals produce a word, accessibility of words with sound overlap is increased, meaning they are more easily/quickly accessed from memory, and thus are more likely to be used in subsequent speech.

We investigate the reverse of speech production—reading—and suggest reading alliterative messages results in a processing advantage related to spontaneous alliterative speech generation. The present research is the first to demonstrate such a process underlying alliteration's persuasive influence, and provides initial insights. Reading involves subvocalization—while reading, one is silently "speaking" within the mind (Pinter 1913; Reed 1916). We suggest the subvocalization of a word should increase accessibility of other words with sound overlap. Building on findings from speech production research, we theorize increased accessibility also occurs during reading. We suggest the subvocalization of a word while reading activates word sounds (phonemes), which increases accessibility of other words with sound overlap. Increased accessibility may facilitate message processing and lead to quicker and more efficient processing,

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