

# Surprise, Surprise. Ambient Media as Promotion Tool for Retailers

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## Abstract

Ambient media evoke surprise with the aim of gaining the attention of consumers who are overexposed to traditional types of advertising. No study has yet considered the effects of unanticipated ambient media. To bridge this gap, the present article reports a field experiment entailing the manipulation of three types of ambient media that create different levels of surprise. The analysis combines observation data for 2,464 passersby, survey data from 305 respondents, and sales figures for 730 days. The results show that surprising ambient media draw attention, promote positive attitudes toward the ad, and stimulate word of mouth. Most importantly, ambient media increase purchase intention and sales revenue. Robustness checks ensure that the model is stable across several conditions, such as time of day or weather conditions. Follow-up studies further reveal that surprise elicits positive effects via two processes; the amplification of accompanying evaluations and the interplay of attention and incongruence resolution. The paper provides guidance for retailers wishing to design surprising ambient media that improve consumer attitudes and profitability. © 2013 New York University. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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## Introduction

Imagine you are walking through a pedestrian zone. Somewhere between store windows, posters, and other advertisements there is a typical ad poster promoting a shoe retailer. Would you stop and look at it? Probably not. What if you suddenly cross a path of real shoes on the pavement instead? Would you stop then? Would you be curious as to where the path heads? Would you follow the shoe path and enter the store to which the path is leading? This study explores the effects of unconventional ambient media such as this shoe path. It is necessary to investigate new advertising forms for retailers, since the average consumer is overexposed to conventional attempts at persuasion. Every day, approximately 3,000 advertising messages try to convince people to buy something (Kim, Bhargava, and Ramaswami 2001). It is therefore not surprising that information overload and wear-out effects dramatically reduce the effectiveness of traditional advertising (Balasubramanian, Karrh, and Patwardhan 2006; Dahlén, Rosengren, and Törn 2008; Darke and Ritchie 2007; van den Putte 2009). Many people also feel constrained

in their freedom to make independent consumption decisions. To reduce this psychological reactance, they avoid being exposed to and influenced by advertisements (Edwards, Li, and Lee 2002).

To overcome the attention dilemma, new creative forms of advertising have evolved (Sasser and Koslow 2008). In particular, surprising consumers is a smart way to gain attention (Derbaix and Pham 1991). Ambient media explicitly intend to surprise consumers by placing advertisements at unusual locations in the direct social environment of the target group, where consumers do not expect them (Luxton and Drummond 2000). Luxton and Drummond (2000) define ambient media as the “placement of advertising in unusual and unexpected places (location) often with unconventional methods (execution) and being first or only ad execution to do so (temporal)”. Extant research indicates that this “non-traditional out-of-home” media (Shankar and Horton 1999) is able to raise attention (Turk, Ewing, and Newton 2006), because it surprises consumers by confronting them with incongruous stimuli against a familiar environment. Ambient media is one of the fastest growing marketing instruments. Due to its relatively low costs and the large number of targets reached, it stimulates a rapid diffusion (Shankar and Horton 1999). Although ambient media is becoming more and more common in retailing, the academic marketing literature has not yet analyzed how surprise evoked by ambient media affects consumer attitudes and behavior.

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Existing knowledge on surprise (Fisk 2002; Meyer, Reisenzein, and Schützwohl 1997; Teigen and Keren 2003) helps in developing hypotheses on the effects of ambient media. Most importantly for our context, surprised individuals interrupt their ongoing activity and focus on the surprise-evoking event (Schützwohl and Reisenzein 1999). In the marketing literature, several studies have investigated the impact of surprise on consumer satisfaction (Vanhamme 2000) and customer delight (Heilmann, Nakamoto, and Rao 2002; Vanhamme and Snelders 2001). By contrast, few studies explore the effect of surprise in an advertising context. If at all, the analysis of surprise is embedded in studies that focus primarily on creativity (Ang and Low 2000; Dahlén 2005; Sasser and Koslow 2008), humor (Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000), or unexpected information (Lee 2000). However, extant studies only consider surprise evoked by the advertising message (e.g., content) itself. No study has explored the effects of unexpected design and placement, and the literature lacks a conceptual framework for describing the psychological processes involved. We believe that ambient media's surprise effect differs from the one of traditional ads containing surprising elements. First, attention is particularly relevant in real-life settings, because advertising messages can only lead to positive attitudes or increasing sales figures if the consumer focuses toward the ad. Ambient media have the power to draw and hold the attention of passersby toward the ad by unexpected media designs and placements (Turk, Ewing, and Newton 2006). While a traditional ad evokes surprise only within the ad content (e.g., text or image elements of the message are unexpected or incongruent) if consumers had already directed their attention toward the ad, ambient media use the incongruent element of the medium that contrasts the surrounding to evoke surprise and to attract passersby. Hence, ambient media can direct attention whereas traditional surprise ads can only intensify processing. From a retailer's point of view, this attention-getting effect of ambient media is far more important than the downstream surprising effect of traditional media. Second, the cognitive processing evoked by surprise differs between ambient media and traditional ads. Receivers of traditional ads only have to resolve incongruent elements of the ad content, while receivers of surprising ambient media have to disentangle the unexpected effects of ad design and placement and find explanations how it fits to the ad message. The additive effect of gaining and holding consumer attention and resolving the incongruence may elicit positive feelings, which are passed on the evaluation of the ambient media and further downstream advertising effects. Additionally, variables such as the general attitude toward advertisements, product involvement, and incongruence resolution come into play as coloring elements of the surprise effect of ambient media. Besides the lacking knowledge about the psychological process, no study has investigated how surprise evoked by ambient media affects real purchase behavior. This article aims at filling these gaps.

We first review the relevant literature on surprise. Secondly, we develop hypotheses on the effect of surprise on attitudes toward the ad and other downstream variables. Thirdly, we report a field experiment with a high level of ecological validity to examine the effects of ambient media within a real-life

setting. We use a multi-method approach, drawing data from three sources and employing various types of analysis, so as to provide robust findings and overcome the risk of method bias (Davis, Golobic, and Boerstler 2011). We explore the effects of surprising ambient media, based on the observation of 2,464 passersby, survey data from 305 respondents, and sales figures for 730 days. Three follow-up studies provide in-depth analysis of the surprise effect on the attitudes toward the ad. A triangulation combining the various data sets and multiple methods provides a holistic view on how ambient media influence consumer attention and behavior. Finally, we point out avenues for further research and make recommendations for retailers and advertisers on how to implement surprising ambient media.

## Theoretical background

### *Development of the surprise emotion*

Most scholars consider surprise as a basic emotion (Ekman and Friesen 1975; Plutchik 1980). We follow the mainstream consensus that surprise is a neutral emotion (Meyer, Reisenzein, and Schützwohl 1997; Reisenzein and Studtmann 2007; Schützwohl 1998; Vanhamme and Snelders 2001). However, although surprise is neutral, there may be a positive or negative connotation, if surprise is accompanied by another affective reaction, such as joy or anger (Ekman and Friesen 1975; Meyer et al. 1991).

Surprise results if a stimulus does not conform to expectations (Izard 1977; Meyer et al. 1991). Stimuli that are novel and unconventional have a low probability of occurring (Ang and Low 2000; Haberland and Dacin 1992; Reisenzein 2000). They are unexpected and therefore surprising (Maguire, Maguire, and Keane 2011; Kahneman and Miller 1986). Expressed more formally, surprise results from schema discrepancy (Gendolla and Koller 2001; Meyer, Reisenzein, and Schützwohl 1997; Whittlesea and Williams 2001). A schema is a private, informal, inarticulate, unreflective theory about the nature of objects, events or situations (Rumelhart 1984). A schema consists of variables and interconnections among variables. For instance, the schema of advertising consists of the variables of claim, tonality, media, and placing. Individuals expect these variables to vary within a range of possible values (Schützwohl 1998). People steadily and unconsciously check whether their schemata match the inputs from their environment, to ensure that they have a realistic representation of the environment (Scherer 1984). Inputs that diverge from the typical range elicit surprise.

### *Coloring of the surprising stimuli*

Different from other emotions, the high level of arousal created by surprise is not directly accompanied by a specific valence (Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000). Although surprise is neutral by definition, the receiver might categorize the surprising stimulus as pleasant or unpleasant. Hence, we assume that the neutral emotion of surprise is often mixed with other emotions that color it either positively (e.g., joy) or negatively (e.g., anger) (Ekman and Friesen 1975). Given that surprise evokes

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