Implications of Selective Processing for Marketing Managers

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Recent research in selective processing theory has produced myriad important findings of interest to marketing managers. At a general level, two streams of selective processing research have emerged; the first considers how selective processing operates in consumer judgment and choice, the second focuses on how the judgments and decisions of managers may be influenced by selective processing. Our paper begins with a discussion of selective processing theory, then summarizes the findings of studies that have focused on consumers. Following this discussion, we provide prescriptive advice for managers with respect to how consumers’ tendency to process information selectively can be leveraged in brand promotion. Next, we present findings specific to how the quality of managers’ evaluations of alternatives and choices can be adversely affected by their own proclivity for selective processing. Finally, we discuss how both managers and consumers can avoid making the inaccurate judgments and suboptimal decisions that often result when processing is selective.

Selective Information Processing: Mechanics and Consequences

Judgment is complicated. Whether one is acting in the role of consumer or manager, each day presents myriad judgmental problems that demand solutions. Unfortunately, while our problems are usually readily apparent, the best solutions often are not. In most cases where a judgment must be rendered, there are multiple possible responses or solutions. If one’s goal is to make the most accurate judgment, or choose the solution associated with the greatest expected value, every possible solution and all
available evidence supporting and undermining each possibility must be considered. Importantly, maximizing judgmental accuracy requires a comparison of the evidence for each solution, and adoption of the solution with the most compelling evidence considered in aggregate.

While perhaps unintuitive, it would be folly for a consumer to try to maximize the accuracy of each and every judgment. Consider a consumer in need of socks. To be confident of making the very best choice given idiosyncratic preferences, this consumer would need to (1) delineate all possible sock options, (2) enumerate all of the attributes and associated attribute values associated with each option, (3) decide on the relative importance of each attribute, and (4) create a summary judgment of what the best sock option is, which would then presumably inform a subsequent choice. This strategy would clearly require an enormous amount of time and effort. While a consumer following it would be sure to be delighted with his or her socks, it is likely that negative consequences would also be experienced because energy that would otherwise be devoted to worthwhile activities such as spending time with one’s family, or working, would instead be devoted to the calculus of optimal sock shopping.

Because individuals have neither unlimited time nor boundless energy, information processing is rarely as fully comparative as in the above example. Instead, often a much more selective information processing strategy is undertaken (Mussweiler 2003). Sanbonmatsu, Posavac, Kardes, and Mantel (1998) have forwarded the Selective Hypothesis Testing framework to understand how individuals typically deal with the necessity of making judgments under constraint.
A hypothesis in this framework refers to possible solutions or responses to a judgmental problem. The best or most accurate hypothesis can be determined only if all possible or plausible hypotheses are generated and pitted against each other in a series of evidentiary comparisons. Instead of this fully comparative strategy, individuals typically consider one focal hypothesis at a time. If evidence gathering in which an individual engages to test the hypothesis appears in an absolute sense to be compelling, the individual concludes that the focal hypothesis is correct. If evidence supporting the focal hypothesis is not easily marshaled, the hypothesis is rejected and another is entertained.

Unfortunately, bias enters into multiple stages of the hypothesis testing process. Evidence is sought that, if present, would imply that the focal hypothesis is correct (Devine, Hirt, and Gehrke 1990; Klayman and Ha 1989). In contrast, evidence that would undermine the focal hypothesis, or support a competing hypothesis, is often neglected (Brenner, Kohler, and Tversky 1996; Klayman and Ha 1987; Van Wallendael and Hastie 1990). In addition to these biases of evidence gathering, individuals also tend to interpret ambiguous evidence as being supportive of the focal hypothesis (Griffin and Ross 1991), and aggregate available evidence in a manner that casts the focal hypothesis in a favorable light.

All of these processes tend to lead individuals to prematurely conclude that the focal hypothesis is best. Thus, factors that determine which hypothesis becomes focal (e.g., the salience and accessibility of hypotheses) have a tremendous influence on the outcome of judgment. Indeed, an initially considered hypothesis is at an advantage compared to other hypotheses because of individuals’ proclivity to prematurely settle on focal hypotheses. The next section considers recent research that documents how
consumers’ judgments are influenced by selective processing, and the implications for their decisions.

**Selective Processing Effects in the Judgments and Decisions of Consumers**

When consumers engage in careful deliberation about one focal brand to the exclusion of others, their evaluation of the focal brand may change. Evaluative judgments, like probabilistic judgments, require individuals to gather and interpret information. Thus, if individuals engage in selective processing of information about one brand and not others, their evaluation of the focal brand may become more extreme. Posavac, Sanbonmatsu, and Ho (2002) conducted a series of experiments to demonstrate how selective consideration of a focal brand can lead to changes in brand attitudes. In their first experiment, participants randomly were assigned to consider one of four charitable organizations with the use of a spinner board. After the focal charity was determined, participants were queried as to the importance of the activities of the focal charity, as well as general attitudes toward the charity. After this manipulation of selective focus, participants’ relative attitudes toward all the charities were measured. Results demonstrated that participants were more favorable to the focal charity than would have been the case had the manipulation of focus not influenced attitudes. Thus, being prompted to carefully consider one but not other options causes the focal option to be evaluated more extremely. In addition to demonstrating the effects of selective consideration on attitudes, participants were also more likely to choose the focal charity than non-focal charities to receive a donation, and were willing to pay more to the focal...
charity than to others. A subsequent experiment concerned with attitudes toward fast food restaurants and charities demonstrated that when consumers selectively deliberate about a brand, the extremity of the attitude (e.g., the attitude itself) changes, not just its accessibility.

The final experiment of Posavac et al. (2002) explored a boundary condition of the positivity effects evidenced in the first two experiments, and delineated how selective deliberation about a focal brand can influence real choices involving money. This experiment was conducted in two sessions. In the first session participants’ attitudes toward four fast food chains were measured. In a second session participants were randomly assigned to selectively deliberate on the restaurant they liked best, second best, or least, or were assigned to a control condition in which they deliberated about a brand of soft drink. After deliberating, they were allowed to choose a coupon from one of the fast food chains to take home. Although deliberating on a favorite brand is unlikely to affect market share in a simple choice task (e.g., because the favorite is very likely to be chosen regardless of any manipulation), when participants selectively deliberated on the fast food chain they had previously rated second best in the first experimental session, they were much more likely to choose it in the second session. Thus, in this condition selective consideration affected choice by increasing the likelihood that the focal fast food chain would be selected.

A very different pattern emerged when participants deliberated on the chain they had rated as least favorite in the first session – in this case the focal chain was not more likely to be chosen. Taken together, these results suggest that selective consideration is likely to increase choice likelihood of a brand that is liked, but is not a consumer’s
favorite brand. The favorite brand is unlikely to benefit from positivity effects due to ceiling effects, and attitudes toward brands that are not liked may be affected by selective consideration – but the resultant attitude may be more negative, and hence unlikely to affect choice.

Recent research has shown that much more subtle manipulations of selective processing can influence product judgments and choice. Posavac, Sanbonmatsu, Kardes, and Fitzsimons (forthcoming) explore consumers’ singular evaluations of brands, and how selective processing can influence these evaluations. Consumers commonly engage in singular brand evaluations. For example, when a consumer notices a brand on a grocer’s endcap he or she must form an absolute judgment of the worth of the brand to inform a decision of whether or not to purchase the brand. In such a situation the evaluative process is likely to be singular because competing brands are not salient.

Experiment 1 of Posavac et al. (forthcoming) was conducted to demonstrate that consumers’ singular evaluations of brands are often overly favorable, and to delineate two important moderators of this effect. Participants were asked to rate one of four first class hotel chains that are well known and well regarded. The focal chain was randomly determined for each participant. Ratings were made in one of four contexts; participants’ cognitive capacity was either constrained or not constrained with a secondary task, and participants were either prompted or not prompted to consider alternatives to their focal chain while making their ratings. Results showed that in the default context in which cognitive capacity was not artificially constrained and consideration of alternatives was not explicitly prompted, participants expressed unrealistically favorable evaluations of the focal chain on a variety of measures (e.g., attitudes, choice intention), even though the
determination of which chain was focal was randomly determined. However, if either
cognitive capacity was constrained or consideration of alternatives was prompted,
participants were much less likely to be influenced by context and report unwarranted
enthusiasm for the focal chain.

The moderating variables delineated in the first experiment likely operated as they
did because they decreased the likelihood that participants would engage in selective
processing of the focal hotel chain. When cognitive load is high, consumers are unlikely
to be able to devote sufficient resources to processing focal brand information for a
positivity effect to occur. When the consideration of alternatives is prompted, processing
is likely to become more comparative, thus again reducing the likelihood of overly
favorable evaluations of the focal brand. Thus, because these variables moderated focal
brand positivity bias, it appears that selective processing drove the effect.

Experiment 2 was conducted to bolster the implication of Experiment 1 that
selective processing mediated focal brand positivity bias. In this experiment, participants
again rated a focal hotel chain, and consideration of alternatives was either prompted or
not prompted. After making the ratings, participants were asked to engage in a thought-
listing task that was used to create an index of how selective versus comparative each
participant’s processing was (i.e., the number of thoughts in the listing about the focal
chain divided by total number of thoughts). Results were consistent with Experiment 1;
focal brand bias was more likely when consideration of alternatives was not prompted.
More important, selective processing mediated this between condition effect, thus
providing direct evidence of the role of selective processing in focal brand bias.
A third experiment reported by Posavac et al. (forthcoming) was conducted with a sample of mature consumers by a mall intercept research firm retained by the authors. This experiment demonstrated focal brand positivity bias in a new category (laundry detergents), and showed that judgmental bias has implications for actual choice; consumers were more likely to choose a box of a randomly selected focal detergent to take home versus a non-focal brand, unless consideration of alternatives was prompted when consumers rated the focal brand.

Recent work suggests that consumers’ product knowledge may be an important moderator of whether singular brand evaluations will be overly favorable (Kardes, Fitzsimons, Sanbonmatsu, and Posavac 2004). Kardes et al. conducted a mall intercept study of evaluations of first class hotels in which the finding of their earlier work that singular evaluations are often overly favorable was replicated. In addition to items measuring evaluations, they also measured consumers’ expertise in two ways; (1) a self report of knowledge of first class hotels, and (2) consumers’ stated likelihood of staying at a first class hotel on their next out of town trip. Results revealed that the judgments of consumers who rated themselves as being either “very” or “extremely” knowledgeable about first class hotels were much better calibrated than those who were “somewhat” or less knowledgeable. That is, experts made much more accurate singular evaluations that were less likely to be influenced by contextually induced selective processing than non-experts. A similar data pattern emerged with respect to consumers’ likelihood of staying at a first class hotel on their next trip; those who were more likely to stay at a first class hotel were much less likely to be overly favorable toward a focal hotel than consumers who were “somewhat” or less likely to stay at such a hotel.
The selective hypothesis testing processes Posavac et al. (forthcoming) observed may explain the differences between evaluation of a single brand and joint evaluation of two brands (Hsee and Leclerc 1998). In Hsee and Leclerc’s experiments, two brands were each described by two attributes, and one brand was always superior on one attribute while inferior on the other. Both brands were either generally good or bad, based on the absolute values of the attributes. Participants were asked to evaluate either one brand, or evaluate both simultaneously. When a good brand was judged alone, judgments were more favorable than when both brands were judged simultaneously. In contrast, a bad brand was judged more unfavorably when judged alone versus when both brands were judged simultaneously. These results may be explained by selective processing. When a brand is judged in isolation, consumers likely consider attributes of the brand to the exclusion of attributes of other brands. Thus, a good brand will be judged to be excellent and a bad brand to be terrible because the benchmark provided by the other brand never becomes apparent. In contrast, when brands are judged at the same time, while one brand may be good, judgments may be only moderately favorable if a good competitor is also judged. In the same way, judgments of a bad brand may become more moderate if joint evaluation makes obvious that the alternatives are also unfavorable.

Selective processing has also been found to lead to distortion of product information when more than one brand is present in other contexts. When decision makers are encouraged to identify which of two brands is the leading brand after each of a series of attributes are examined, Russo, Meloy and Medvec (1998) find that information that might otherwise be interpreted as neutral is found to be supportive of the brand leader. They find that this result is robust across situations where no prior brand
preference existed and even when no choice was required. The magnitude of the “pre-
decisional distortion” was found to be twice that typically observed in traditional post-
decisional distortion due to dissonance reduction.

Similarly, Meyvis and Janiszewski (2002) find that selective processing can lead
to a non-normative dependence on irrelevant information in product judgments. In a
typical study, they manipulated whether irrelevant information was present in a
description of a singular product in a category and asked them to form judgments of the
product. They found that participants held lower evaluations of products that had
irrelevant information added to their descriptions relative to the same product description
without the irrelevant information attached. Over a series of studies they concluded that
the mechanism driving this effect was selective processing: For example, decision makers
asked to evaluate a toothpaste that fought cavities found support for their hypothesis that
it was a good brand, while those asked to evaluate a toothpaste that fought cavities and
came in a six-ounce tube experienced this information as one supportive data point and
one non-supportive data point. The net result of this selective processing was that
participants judged the former toothpaste as more attractive than the latter.

In addition to brand judgment and choice, selective processing also has been
shown to have consequences for consumers’ evaluations of gambling options, and their
gambling choices. In a series of experiments investigating sports gambling judgments and
decisions, Gibson, Sanbonmatsu, and Posavac (1997) found that when individuals
selectively considered the likelihood that a given outcome would occur (e.g., that a given
team would win an NCAA or NBA game, whether a team would cover a point spread in a
given game), they typically overestimated the probability of the focal outcome. This
overconfidence that a given outcome would occur translated into increased willingness to gamble generally, and specifically increased betting on the focal outcome. These results were mediated by selective processing; to the extent that an individual focused on reasons why a focal outcome might occur and ignored reasons supporting an alternate outcome, they were particularly likely to overestimate the likelihood of the focal outcome and gamble that it would occur.

Selective processing effects may be ubiquitous, including both judgments of consumer options and, more broadly, judgments of firms. Houghton and Kardes (1998) demonstrated that judgments of firm performance, specifically market share, may be erroneous as a result of selective processing. In their study, participants were given information about a focal company, and asked to estimate its market share as well as that of other companies. These market share judgments appear to have been made selectively, as total market share judgments across companies summed to well over 100% (an obvious impossibility). In the second part of the study, consumers were given additional information about the focal firm, and asked to estimate market share a second time. Of course, market share is a zero sum game, and if one firm gains or loses, remaining firms must lose or gain in correspondence. Houghton and Kardes (1998) found, though, that judgments of the focal firm were typically made independent of other firms. Thus, judgments of firm performance appear to have been made selectively according to some absolute assessment of firm worth instead of the normatively appropriate comparative strategy. This tendency was reduced when either participants were low in need for closure (Webster and Kruglanski 1994), or there were a large number of nonfocal alternatives.
The findings reviewed so far demonstrate that selective processing can affect consumers’ judgments and choices regarding specific objects or options. Recent research has shown that selective processing also can affect consumers’ judgments of the sufficiency of consideration sets from which they choose (Kardes, Sanbonmatsu, Cronley, and Houghton 2002). When presented with a randomly determined consideration set of 35mm cameras that was much smaller than the available number of options, consumers indicated a higher than possible probability that the set contained the best brand. Consistent with a selective processing explanation, this tendency was particularly severe for consumers who listed few brands in a subsequent task in which they were asked to generate as many camera brands as possible in 15 seconds. Thus, to the extent that consumers processed the given brands selectively and were less sensitive to consideration set omissions, they were likely to overvalue the consideration set they were given.

The judgmental effects Kardes et al. (2002) report also had consequences for stated search behavior and choice intention; to the extent that consumers perceived that their consideration set contained the best brand they indicated greater likelihood of buying one of the brands in the set, and less desire to search for information about other brands if they were in the market for a camera. Kardes et al. (2002) show that these results are robust in different product categories, and when consideration sets are constructed from the offerings of big retailers as well as boutique shops. Results also suggest that consumers will be sensitive to the limitations of a given consideration set only when the absence of important brands is highly salient, and consumers are low in need for closure.
Sanbonmatsu, Kardes, Houghon, Ho, and Posavac (2003) demonstrate that consumers may be as insensitive to attributes that are missing from a product description as they are to brands that are not included in a consideration set. It is often the case that product descriptions, for example in advertisements, are incomplete and feature only the subset of attributes on which an advertised brand is highly competitive. In other cases only attributes consistent with the desired brand positioning will be relayed. Because accurate brand judgment requires integration of all brand relevant information, when information about a brand is missing judgments should be moderate. Sanbonmatsu et al. (2003) show, however, that consumers typically are insensitive to omissions of attribute information. Instead, when consumers receive information about some attributes of a brand they typically perceive the attributes that are presented as the most important to consider when making a decision from the category to which the brand belongs. This overweighing of presented attributes, in turn, leads to overly extreme judgments of the favorableness of the brand. These tendencies are attenuated only when (1) consumers possess high knowledge about the relevant category, (2) a comparison brand described by more attribute information than the target brand is present, thus highlighting that some attribute information about the target brand in missing, and/or (3) consumers consider their judgmental criteria before being exposed to brand information, thus limiting the impact of context on their judgments.

While selective processing can affect perceptions of the importance of attributes, it can also affect consumers’ perceptions of the relation between attributes of a product. Kardes, Cronley, Kellaris, and Posavac (forthcoming) demonstrate that selective processing is an important contributor to consumers’ tendency to overestimate the
correlation between the price and quality of products. Consumers typically believe that the price of a product is predictive of its quality. This perception acts as a select hypothesis when consumers process information about the attributes of brands. Specifically, when a consumer is trying to form an inference about the strength of the price-quality correlation in a particular category, he or she is likely to focus on cases that confirm expectations; that is, instances where a high price is associated with a high quality brand, and instances of a low priced poor quality brand.

Kardes et al. (forthcoming) conducted a series of experiments aimed at understanding moderators of the strength of consumers’ price-quality perceptions when they encounter brand information. Similar to Posavac et al. (forthcoming), Kardes et al. reasoned that if selective processing was a contributor to price-quality relation overestimation, variables that increased the likelihood of selective processing would commensurately increase consumers’ perceptions of how strongly predictive prices are of quality in different categories. Kardes et al. (forthcoming) replicated the finding that consumers typically dramatically overestimate the price-quality relationship. However, they also demonstrated that this overestimation was less severe when concern about closure is low, if information load is high, and information about brands’ prices and quality is presented randomly versus rank ordered by price. These moderators influenced participants’ estimations of the price-quality relation because they influenced the likelihood of selective processing. Specifically, selective processing is less likely when concern about closure is low. Moreover, when brand price and quality information is random versus presented in rank order, it is more difficult to selectively consider cases confirmatory of the initial hypothesis (i.e., that price predicts quality). Similarly, selective
processing is inhibited when there are a large number of cases because consumers are more likely to encounter belief-inconsistent cases because cognitive overload precludes screening of cases that do not conform to expectations.

A second project on the role of selective processing in consumers’ estimates of the relation between price and quality provides direct empirical evidence that selective processing underlies consumers’ formation of price-quality inferences (Cronley et al. 2004). Additionally, this paper shows in a real choice setting that when context induces high need for closure and accordingly the perception of a strong correlation between price and quality, consumers will buy more expensive products.

How Managers can Leverage Consumers’ Proclivity to Process Information Selectively

One important conclusion of the research summarized above is that good brands are often evaluated more favorably than they should be when judgments are singular. Brands that are moderately good may be particularly likely to be overvalued when judged singularly. This finding has implications for the promotion of both superior brands, and brands that are good but are not the best brand in a given choice category. Generally, taken together, the selective processing literature highlights the importance of being considered early in the consumer’s decision process. Consistent with these field studies are sales data documenting the remarkably consistent ability of end cap displays to increase market share; likely a result of consumers’ selective processing tendencies.
Positivity effects in singular brand judgment are particularly likely in product categories that are novel to the consumer or are purchased from infrequently. In each of these cases consideration sets are not likely to be preformed, and the order in which a consumer considers brands in the category is not set. Many infrequently purchased goods are likely to fall prey to brand positivity effects as products in these categories are more likely to be sold in a way that facilitates singular comparison. For example, automobiles are often sold through exclusive dealerships where the brand the consumer is considering is the only brand available for evaluation. Similarly, high-end kitchen supply stores often carry only one brand of stove, refrigerator and dishwashing machine, while customers in the market for a riding lawnmower typically find only one brand available for evaluation at any given store.

The brand positivity effect is good news for marketers of brands in such product categories that are good but not great. Marketers often assume that increasing the positivity with which consumers evaluate a brand requires revision of the brand. However, the research discussed above suggests the simpler intervention of facilitating the consideration of the brand early in the decision process. If a good but not great brand is evaluated first, the positivity of consumers’ evaluations of the brand, as well as purchase likelihood, may increase. Practically, this suggests a shift in emphasis in a moderately good brand’s promotional campaign from, for example, a benefits-focused campaign to a campaign that attempts to build brand awareness, or potentially away from an advertising based campaign towards a campaign that induces trial (e.g., free samples, etc.).
Being evaluated early in the choice process will also be important for marketers of superior brands. In this case, being evaluated first is important because it would preclude the possibility of consumers evaluating and coming to prefer a competing good that may be relatively inferior, but nevertheless acceptable. Although marketers of a superior brand may not directly benefit from the brand positivity effect if their brand is evaluated singularly (i.e., inflated evaluations and purchase likelihood), being evaluated first may prevent a relatively inferior competitor from gaining from the effect. While a shift in promotional emphasis away from a benefit emphasis and toward awareness building may fly in the face of conventional wisdom for a leading/superior brand, the strategic value of preempting any potential brand positivity effect for inferior brands may justify such an approach.

Positivity biases in favor of a focal brand may be particularly likely when less than the total available number of brands are salient at the time of decision making. This situation arises, for example, when a choice is memory based (i.e., options are not specified in the decision context, for example, choosing a restaurant for lunch based on remembered options), or a limited number of options are presented in a stimulus based choice (e.g., a grocer’s shelf typically omits many brands). Research has shown that consumers often consider many fewer than the total number of possible options when making decisions. (Nedungadi 1990; Posavac, Sanbonmatsu, and Fazio 1997; Posavac, Herzenstein, and Sanbonmatsu 2003). As noted earlier, selective processing often results in consumers being satisfied, even enthusiastic, about a consideration set from which myriad good options are missing (Sanbonmatsu et al. 2003). These processes again suggest that marketers must strive for high awareness of their brands. Indeed, even if a
firm markets a great product, consumers will blissfully ignore it if is not readily incorporated into their consideration set.

The tendency for consumers to engage in selective processing also has relevance for media planning. Consistent with the position of expert media planners (Ephron 1998), we suggest that it will be extremely important for advertisements to reach consumers in close temporal proximity to their decisions so that brand awareness will be high. Thus, continuous scheduling may typically be necessary for advertising to have a meaningful impact on brand choice.

While marketers typically will want to encourage the selective consideration of their brands, in some cases a strategy that encourages comparative evaluation will be best. If a target brand and its competitors are mediocre, or a target brand has a liability on an attribute that is common to category alternatives, comparative evaluation will ensure that the focal brand is not disparaged more than it should be given its standing among competitors. Comparative advertising may be an apt option for a marketer faced with such a situation.

Consumers’ selective processing tendencies suggest an opportunity for managers to affect brand choice by manipulating consumers’ perceptions of the strength of the relationship between brand price and quality. If a manager wants to move low end items (e.g., a store brand, or an overstocked low priced brand), he or she should create a choice context in which need for closure is low and it is difficult for consumers to selectively attend to high price/high quality and low price/low quality products. For example, a retailer could arrange store shelves such that product arrangement is independent of price and brand quality. Similarly, the order of items presented by a catalog publisher should
be non-systematic with respect to price and quality. In either case, consumers are likely to perceive a relatively low association between price and quality, and thus are likely to choose lower end products because they will not be worried that doing so will mean a commensurate loss of quality.

A marketer desiring to sell relatively more high end products should do the reverse. Specifically high need for closure should be facilitated, and products should be presented ordered according to quality. In this case, consumers would likely examine less price-quality data points, and those considered would be more likely to suggest a high price-quality relationship. Consumers’ perceptions of a strong price-quality relationship, in turn, would likely translate to choice of higher priced products because they perceive that spending more would be needed to ensure a quality purchase.

**Selective Processing in the Judgments and Decisions of Managers**

Recent research in managerial decision making has shown that the singular judgments of managers may show focal object positivity bias similar to that evidenced in studies of consumer judgment. For example, Sanbonmatsu, Posavac, and Stasny (1997) conducted a series of experiments to understand how selective processing may influence evaluations of job candidates. In one experiment, participants were given descriptions of four equally positive job candidates, and were asked to evaluate the likelihood that one randomly selected candidate would receive the job. While there were no differences in judgments across the candidates, the focal candidate was routinely perceived to be more likely to be hired than non-focal candidates on a variety of measures. Thus, singular
evaluations of job candidates can result in unwarranted enthusiasm about a focal candidate. Subsequent experiments reported by Sanbonmatsu et al. (1997) delineate the role of selective processing in positivity bias in job candidate judgments by showing that more information about the focal candidate was recalled than for non-focal candidates, and that selectivity in information processing predicted judgment favorableness; participants were more favorable toward the focal candidate to the extent that they were more selective in considering attributes about the focal candidate versus non-focal candidates.

Sanbonmatsu et al. (1997) also make the important point that singular evaluations are not necessarily overly positive, but instead are likely to be overly extreme. Their third experiment featured judgments of a focal job candidate randomly selected from a set of candidates who were each described by equally valenced negative information. Generally, participants perceived the focal candidate as being overly unfavorable. This trend emerged because participants tended to selectively consider attributes of the focal candidate to the exclusion of non-focal candidates, and thus became convinced that the focal candidate was particularly bad.

Managers’ judgments and choices regarding marketing strategy may be similarly suspect to bias interjected by their tendency to process information selectively. Posavac, Kardes, and Brakus (2003) conducted an experiment with a sample of individuals with a mean of 6 years of work experience to show how decisions regarding new product development may be adversely affected when processing is singular versus comparative. In their study participants were asked to imagine that they were managing a computer company, and were going to launch one of four recently conceived prototypes, which
varied with respect to attributes but were each equally favorable in aggregate. Each participant was randomly assigned to evaluate one of these prototypes. Results demonstrated that participants were overly favorable to the focal prototype, even though it was determined randomly. Specifically, participants indicated greater likelihood that the focal prototype was the best, and a greater percentage of Executive Board members who would support the focal prototype versus a non-focal prototype, than if the manipulation of which prototype was focal had no effect on judgment. Moreover, participants’ expressed unwarranted enthusiasm for the focal prototype on a Likert measure, and were more likely to choose the focal prototype for launch than if the manipulation of focus had no effect. Analyses demonstrated that selective processing mediated these results; participants were overly favorable toward the focal prototype to the extent that they selectively considered information about the focal prototype to the exclusion of information about non-focal prototypes.

In a second experiment, Posavac et al. (2003) considered more general brand strategy. Specifically, a similar sample was presented with a managerial situation in which sales of a company’s paint were stagnant, and management decided to intervene to increase sales. Four strategies were described (e.g., increase ad spending, invest into research and development), and participants were asked to evaluate one of these strategies with dependent variables similar to the first experiment. A similar pattern of results obtained, as participants were overly enthusiastic that the focal strategy was best, simply as a result of it being focal. As with the first experiment, selective processing drove the effects; to the extent that participants selectively considered the focal strategy to the exclusion of the competing strategies, they were likely to be overly influenced by
context and become overly favorable toward the focal strategy. Clearly, a manager who becomes convinced that a prototype or strategy is best simply because it has become focal risks making poor judgments and decisions, and moreover is a liability to his or her firm.

Avoiding Erroneous Singular Judgments and Suboptimal Decisions

The research discussed in this chapter reveals an important shortcoming that often characterizes both consumers’ and managers’ judgments. An initially considered object, whether it be a brand or an attribute, a person, a possible outcome, or a company, is likely to be judged as being of more worth or value than it should be simply because the object has become focal. As discussed earlier, there is clear upside for managers who understand how consumers are often influenced by selective hypothesis testing processes when they make judgments and decisions. Moreover, a manager who recognizes the liabilities engendered by his or her own selective processing tendencies may be able to make better decisions untainted by irrelevant situational factors that randomly highlight particular courses of action.

To avoid being unduly influenced by selective hypothesis testing processes, it is important for managers to understand how options typically become salient, and to question whether the determinants of whether an option has become salient have any relation to the expected value of choosing the option. In some cases particularly good options are likely to become salient. For example, the suggestions of a bright subordinate whose incentives are well aligned with the firm’s interests are fertile ground for quality
hypotheses. In contrast, sometimes relatively poor hypotheses will come to the foreground. For example, a subordinate acting in self-interest, or seeking to curry favor, is likely to suggest courses of action that are inferior from the firm’s perspective. If the latter state of affairs is likely there is particularly high risk of a bad decision if the manager processes the focal course of action selectively.

As the research reviewed in this paper delineates, the processes underlying overly favorable singular evaluations are similar whether the judgment is of a consumer product or a managerial strategy; selectively focusing on an option that has become salient typically leads to unwarranted favorableness toward it. Thus, it is crucial for managers to engage in comparative processing so that irrelevant contextual factors that influence which options become focal do not have undue influence on their judgments and decisions. By first generating a list of possibilities (e.g., managerial actions, causal theories about a marketplace phenomenon), then considering the relative merits and liabilities of each possibility, managers will be able to make judgments free from the bias typically engendered by selective processing in singular evaluation. A potentially useful implementation facilitative of comparative processing may be to assign each member of an organizational committee to argue for a different possibility. Thus, the evidence for and worth of multiple possibilities are sure to be considered, as will evidence against and liabilities of those possibilities.
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