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## The Effect of Color and Flavor Names on Consumer Choice

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### Overview of Research

An examination of the colors in a Crayola crayon box reveals an interesting phenomenon – while the original Crayola crayons box contained six colors (black, blue, brown, green, orange, and red), Crayola now offers 120 different colors, and the most recent of these (e.g., purple heart, razzmatazz, tropical rain forest, fuzzy wuzzy brown) are increasingly ambiguously named. These types of ambiguous color (and flavor) names have been proliferating and are appearing in all sorts of product categories from ice-cream (e.g., Ben and Jerry's Chubby Hubby) to juice drinks (e.g., Gatorade's Glacier Freeze) to nail polish (e.g., Hard Candy's Trailer Trash), leading at least one reporter to exclaim, "there is no red" (Schulz 2001).

How do such names impact consumers? Can they influence how consumers perceive products and their likelihood of purchasing them? In this research, we examine such questions and develop a theory to explain how such names impact consumers' choices. We find that names do impact choices and that this impact depends on the novelty of the name (is it typical or atypical?), its specificity (is it specific or vague?), and what additional information is available (e.g., is a picture of the actual color shade available?).

According to Grice's (1975) theory of "conversational implicature," people adhere to certain rules when they communicate with each other. These rules allow people to understand more than just what was said. For example, if A asks B where Dave is, and B replies that there is a yellow VW outside of Susan's house, A will assume that (1) Dave drive a yellow VW and therefore is (2) at Susan's house. On a literal level, B's response is a complete non-sequitor. But, because A believes B's response is informative, A can understand the underlying meaning of the communication – that Dave is at Susan's.

Building on Grice's theory, we propose that consumers will react favorably to unusual color or flavor names because they expect marketing messages to convey useful information. If the message is not informative (as is the case for ambiguous names) or does not conform to expectations (as is the case for atypical specific names), consumers search for the reasons for the deviation. This search results in additional (positive) attributions about the product, and thus, a more favorable response. A series of studies provide support for our proposal and suggest the conditions under which these name types will be most preferred.

In the first study, participants were presented with six different varieties of jelly beans and told they could take as many jelly beans as they liked. The jelly beans were labeled with either ambiguous names (e.g., moody blue, Florida red) or typical specific names (e.g., blueberry blue, cherry red). In addition, half of the participants were distracted during their choices, while the other half made their choices without any distractions. Those participants who saw ambiguous names and were not distracted when they made their choices chose more jelly beans than participants in any of the other three groups.

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In the second study, participants were told that they had decided to order some sweaters from a catalogue. They were presented with a list of the available items and asked to indicate how many of each item they would like. Participants saw ambiguous color names (e.g., antique red, lucky brown), atypical-specific names (e.g., Coke red, freckle brown), typical-specific names (e.g., cherry red, chocolate brown), or common names (e.g., dark red, light brown). Less typical items were chosen more often than more typical items. In addition, participants who saw ambiguous names chose more items than those participants in any other condition.

In the third study, we examined how preferences for different name types are affected when a picture of the color shade is also available. Participants were asked to imagine that they were ordering a sweater from a catalogue. Half the participants saw a picture of the color (a color swatch) prior to seeing the color name, while the other half saw the name of the color, and then the picture. After selecting which color sweater they wished to order, participants saw a picture of the actual sweater and were asked how satisfied they were with it. Viewing a picture of the color prior to the name reduced satisfaction for those who saw ambiguous names, but increased satisfaction for those who saw atypical specific names. The order of presentation did not change satisfaction for those who saw common or typical specific names.

These results suggest that when consumers encounter a surprising name (one that is counter to expectations), they engage in additional elaboration about the name to try to understand why it was provided. The type of elaboration will depend on how the name violates expectations – if the name is vague (and hence, uninformative in a literal sense), consumers will engage in a Gricean process to determine the meaning of the communication; if the name is uninformative because it is new (or atypical), consumers will search for the reason the particular adjective was selected as described by incongruity theory. The result of this additional elaboration is increased satisfaction with the product.

### **Significance of Research**

Our results suggest that color names can influence purchase, and that this effect is related to the novelty and specificity (or lack thereof) of the names and people's tendency to treat information in the marketplace as part of a conversation between the consumer and the company.

We demonstrate that the type of color name matters and that color names impact product decisions due to both the name's novelty and its lack of specificity. For novel names referring to a specific shade, satisfaction will be highest when the color shade is seen prior to the name. However, seeing the shade prior to the name will decrease satisfaction for ambiguous names.

Consumers believe that information in the marketplace should conform to certain norms, similar to those which operate in everyday conversations. When information does not conform to expectations, either because the name is ambiguous or because it is unfamiliar, consumers will try to make sense of the name. The specific process they use will depend on characteristics of the name itself. When the source of norm violation is an unfamiliar name, consumers will use a process consistent with incongruity theory; when the source of norm violation is a lack of informativeness, consumers will use a Gricean process.

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