

To be remembered, be opinionated. Lessons on source memory for brands and policymakers

People remember who shared an opinion more than who stated a fact. In a crowded media landscape, making your message stick means making it personal.



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You're caught in the middle of a heated debate when someone says the dreaded words: "I'm

going to need a source for that.” At which point you realize you have no idea where you first heard the claim.

This is a stark example of source memory — a form of memory that helps you remember not just what was said, but who said it — letting you down.

Source memory failures are a feature of everyday life. We forget who recommended a new restaurant, who asked for updated materials and which organization was behind the latest public survey we’ve been so keenly quoting. We live in an information-rich world, and keeping track of who said what can be surprisingly difficult (especially as we get older).

Added to this are the billions of dollars spent every year on advertisements and marketing. There, too, we sometimes remember the message but forget just *which* battery company has the pink bunny that keeps going and going.

That said, it turns out that we remember sources for some kinds of information much better than for others. In research published in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, IESE’s [Daniel Mirny](#) and Stephen A. Spiller of UCLA investigate how the [source for an opinion](#) sticks in the mind much better than the source for a *fact*.

Across 13 experiments in a variety of different consumer contexts, participants were tested on their memory of sources. Across a wide range of contexts and claims, people consistently identified sources of opinions more accurately than sources of facts. The magnitude of this effect ranged from a 2.6% to a 12.5% difference (in accuracy of source memory for opinions vs. facts), underscoring a persistent cognitive feature of how we encode and recall new information.

About source memory

Being able to link a claim to who said it is essential for accurate recall, forming opinions and attitudes, and making decisions. There are implications for persuasion and politics, consumer choice and public health.

The human brain looks for shortcuts, and rather than carefully fact-checking each new claim, people often instinctively rely on the perceived credibility of the person or institution delivering it. If the source seems trustworthy, people are more likely to believe it. It’s worth saying that in an age of misinformation, these shortcuts can be dangerous.

The moment when a piece of information and its source are committed to memory is known as “encoding.” What happens when the information is being encoded can have significant effects on how it is recalled down the line.

When a person states a fact (“Paris is the capital of France”), little is revealed about the speaker. If that same person states an opinion (“Paris is the most beautiful city in the world”), we, the listeners, start to get information about that person’s preferences and worldview.

“What we found,” Mirny says, “is that people remembered a source better if they had learned something about that source. So people could more reliably match an opinion to who had said it. But source memory could be better for facts as well, if the fact sheds some light on the source, like the statement, ‘I never drink coffee after lunch.’ On the other hand, when we deliberately broke the link between how informative an opinion is about a source by telling participants in our experiment that the source was only repeating *someone else’s* claim, source memory declined again.”

What does this mean for managers and brands?

In marketing campaigns, managers often choose to deliver messages through carefully vetted sources. Over time, though, consumers are likely to forget or misattribute the source of a claim, which can equally be a problem for brands (like Energizer, whose pink bunny can be misattributed to competitors) and policymakers (consider the fraught state of public health communications).

“What our research suggests is that providing more information about a source, or presenting information in a way that highlights something about the source, can result in a better memory of who said what, because it strengthens the encoded link between the information and the source,” says Mirny.

In marketing, this might mean briefing influencers to share something personal about themselves when they’re working for a brand. For example, an influencer might say, “You might not know this about me, but I love to cook,” before sharing a discount code for Le Creuset cookware.

In public health guidelines, which frequently rely on experts, it could be helpful to have experts share something about their own beliefs before launching into fact-based advice.

4 tips for your advertising and communications strategy

Because clients are often exposed to advertising some time before they need or wish to purchase a product, effectively linking your brand to your message is essential. But it's a crowded marketplace, with many competing companies making similar claims. With that in mind, marketing managers should consider:

- Using opinions to reinforce brand-message connections.
- Embedding opinions or other personal information when working with public representatives, influencers or branded storytelling.
- Avoiding overreliance on dry, factual claims, especially when brand differentiation is critical.
- Designing messages that help audiences learn something about the speaker, not just the product.

Ultimately, a marketing strategy that appeals on a personal level to the sender — whether through opinions, stories or experiences — can make a difference in message retention and brand recall.



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