

**Harvard  
Business  
Review****Marketing****Surprise Is Still the Most  
Powerful Marketing Tool**

by Scott Redick

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Life has never been more predictable.

Yelp provides an early-warning system for dining out, by helping us avoid bad restaurants and alerting us to must-try items at good ones. Facebook lets us investigate a potential romantic interest before the first date. Turn-by-turn instructions from Google Maps prevent us from ever getting lost.

The same thing is happening in marketing organizations. “Big Data” is the latest buzzword in our industry. Data-rich practices such as econometric modeling, analytics and copy-testing offer brand managers an alluring promise of precision and predictability. Pull lever X, out will pop Y as a result.

All this is good — mostly. These tools can certainly make our profession more efficient. But they also can make brands less exciting and surprising. With all of this information at our disposal, we risk robbing brands of opportunities for serendipity — the delightful surprises that happen when we least expect them, attracting the attention of consumers.

Pursuing innovations in “big data” is essential, but that doesn’t mean we should ignore the element of surprise, because surprise is still probably the most powerful marketing tool of all. Here’s why.

**Surprise is addictive.** Surprise is like crack for your brain.

Scientists at Emory and Baylor used MRIs to measure changes in human brain activity in response to a sequence of pleasurable stimuli, using fruit juice and water. The patterns of juice and water squirts were either predictable or completely unpredictable. Contrary to the researchers' expectations, the reward pathways in the brain responded most strongly to the unpredictable sequence of squirts. "The region lights up like a Christmas tree on the MRI," said Dr. Read Montague, an associate professor of neuroscience at Baylor. "That suggests people are designed to crave the unexpected." Birchbox, a subscription service that sends customers a box of mystery beauty products each month, and Phish, the rock band that never performs the same show twice, proves that entire business models can be built around this insight.

**Surprise changes behavior.** Remember your psychology 101 class and the idea of cognitive dissonance? Surprise introduces us to new stimuli, which we must then reconcile with shifts in our beliefs and behavior. "It's been known for a long time that it's unexpected events, in particular, that drive learning," says Wael Asaad, assistant professor of neurosurgery at Brown University. Thinking in terms of desired consumer behavior can unlock innovative strategies. When developing an advertising campaign we are often too focused on the question of "What do we need to say?" Instead, we should focus on the question of "What expectations do our customers and prospects hold, and how can we turn those on their head?"

**Surprise is cheap.** All it takes is a dime to make someone's day. Psychologist Norbert Schwarz conducted a study in which a dime was placed near a copy machine. When the subjects who found the dime were surveyed shortly after their discovery, their overall satisfaction with life was substantially higher than the subjects who did not find a coin. Rather than attempt to beat the competition with epic production budgets and media plans, marketers should think about how to cram surprising brand stories into the smallest space possible. Consider how Virgin America infuses charm and creativity into everything from

website downtime notifications to safety videos.

**Surprise turbocharges emotions.** Psychologist Robert Plutchik's psychoevolutionary theory of emotion classifies our feelings into primary emotions, such as anger or fear, and more nuanced secondary emotions that combine these, like bittersweet (happiness + sadness) or guilt (happiness + fear). The interesting thing about surprise is that it appears to amplify whatever you're feeling. When we're surprised and angry, we're outraged. Remember what happened when Netflix raised subscription prices without warning? Combine happiness with surprise, and you hit the upper register of the feeling-good scale. This helps explain why Zappos goes to such lengths to deliver shoes before they are promised, and why the word "delight" is almost always preceded by the words "surprise and."

**Surprise fuels passionate relationships.** Whether it's sending a new lover flowers on a random Tuesday ("just because"), or sealing the deal with a memorable marriage proposal, romance is all about surprise. One experiment conducted among middle-aged married couples found that engaging in less common, but more "exciting" activities like skiing or dancing led to greater marriage satisfaction than pursuing activities that are more common and "pleasant," like seeing a movie or cooking together. The same principles apply to business relationships. Marketers typically spend the bulk of their creative energy making themselves look attractive to potential customers. It's easy to forget you need to look sexy and charming to your current ones to keep the spark alive.

As CMOs push their staffs and agencies to be faster, cheaper and more accountable, they also need to push the brand organization to be more surprising. Unfortunately, there doesn't appear to be much in the way of academic research or enterprise-grade software to make this happen. It really comes down to a question of imagination and bravery. And, I suspect, it has something to do with being open to situations where you might be surprised yourself.

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