

Images: How to Get Through Their Guard

The images we see create attitudes within us. It is no random accident that most U.S. presidents have pet dogs in the White House. Consciously and unconsciously, a loving, obedient, trusting dog creates a positive image of its owner. The president usually has a dog. Voters would be more likely to reject a politician who preferred cats, hamsters, snakes, ferrets, or tarantulas.

It really isn't a secret that we are abundantly influenced by imagery when making everyday decisions. We are much more likely to donate to someone wearing a Santa Claus suit than to someone in street attire. We are more trusting of a sales rep wearing a gold cross around his neck. Sports bars decorate their walls with jerseys and other sports paraphernalia. Credit card companies are among the greatest users of imagery and association. Because credit cards give us immediate gratification without us having to face the negative consequences until weeks later, we often think of the perceived positive associations before the negative ones. Consumer researcher Richard Feinberg conducted several different studies testing the effects credit cards had on our spending habits. He came across some very interesting results. For example, he found that restaurant patrons gave higher tips when using a credit card as opposed to cash. In another case, consumers were found to show a 29% increase in their willingness to spend when the merchandise was examined in a room displaying MasterCard signs. More interesting still was the fact that the subjects were unaware that the MasterCard signs were an intentional and calculated part of the experiment. Feinberg discovered the same results when subjects were asked to donate to a charity. When the room contained the MasterCard insignias, 87% donated, as compared to only 33% donating when the room did not contain such signs. Ironically, credit cards were not used to give a donation. The study produced startling evidence of how associations can be used to create greater compliance. A simple image, with its related associations, caused the subjects to be more liberal with the cash they had on hand.

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