Subliminal Signals: All in the Mind

abcnews.com Sept 12, 2015

Have you ever noticed the word “SEX” written in the dots of a Ritz cracker? How about the image of a naked woman disguised in ice cubes of alcohol ads or phallic symbols on a pack of Camel cigarettes? At least one psychologist, Wildon Bryan Key, claims they’re there. But if you see them, their supposed subliminal message is not working.

“The name of the game is don’t get caught,” says Key, who has authored several books about subliminal advertising including The Age of Manipulation.

Subliminal messages are only subliminal if people don’t realize what they’ve seen. They are intended to work by tapping the unconscious mind of viewers or listeners and influencing them to think or feel a certain way.

That’s why Key and other psychologists argue the G.O.P ad that clearly flashes the word “RATS” as a narrator criticizes democratic health care programs is either a botched attempt at subliminal messaging or a coincidence.

What’s more, many psychologists argue that even if it had been an accurate use of subliminal advertising, it probably wouldn’t have worked.

Subliminal Legend
The concept of subliminal advertising first made a splash in 1957 when a marketer named James Vicary said he had subjected moviegoers to split-second messages urging them to drink Coca-Cola and eat popcorn. He claimed even though no one actually noticed the images, the messages reached the subconscious of the viewers and triggered an increase of popcorn and Coke sales by as much as 58 percent.

The news sparked public outrage, fear and even talk of a ban by Congress and the Federal Communications Commission. The example is often mentioned in psychology textbooks, says Anthony Pratkanis, a psychologist at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

But what is often not mentioned, he says, is that Vicary’s study was a hoax by some. When psychologists later tried to duplicate the study and failed, the marketing entrepreneur supposedly admitted he’d made it all up.

“Fascination with subliminal advertising really amazes me,” says Pratkanis. “Even though they’ve been proven ineffective, people seem to think they work.”

Unhelpful Self-Help
In the mid-1980s, Pratkanis tested the effectiveness of subliminal messages in another media — self-help recordings. For his tests, Pratkanis took tapes that had subliminal messages planted in otherwise calming audio of music and natural sounds. One set of tapes was designed to promote self-esteem, another set claimed to improve memory.

Pratkanis asked a group of people to respond to questions about their memory and self-esteem. Then he had them listen to the tapes and fill out the same forms again. “There were absolutely no changes in the scores,” he reports, “but we also found people thought they were effective.”
He explains when he asked the subjects if they thought their memories had improved, about half said an overwhelming yes — if their tapes had been labeled as the memory-improving tapes. But Pratkanis had switched the labels on several of the tapes, so he calculates their response was based only on their perceptions that subliminal messages are effective. “The take home message is subliminal messages are not effective, but a lot of people think they are,” he says.

Pervasive Belief
In fact, a 1988 study found that 80 to 90 percent of Americans are aware of subliminal stimulation and up to two-thirds of them believe it works. Pratkanis believes some of that unease is due to several books written by author Key, that claim the use of subliminal messages in media, government and the military is pervasive.

Key is adamant about his findings, saying, “The only reason the behaviorists doubt it is they can’t explain it. But media doesn’t work that way. Of course it’s there.” Pratkanis and other psychologists argue Key does not back up his claims with adequate tests an analysis.

At least one new analysis, however, does begin to support the idea that subliminal messages can affect people’s thinking — at least briefly.

Anthony Greenwald, a psychologist at the University of Washington in Seattle, recently asked a group of people to classify words showed to them as pleasant or unpleasant by pressing one of two buttons.

To test for subliminal effects, Greenwald flashed another word for a split second before showing the word subjects could see clearly. For example, before presenting “sugar,” he would flash a millisecond image of the word “poison” or of the word “honey.”

The impact was obvious. He found when the subliminal word had a similar meaning as the word it preceded, the subjects selected the correct button more quickly. But when the flashed word had the opposite meaning, their reaction was delayed or even reversed.

“My own experiment shows it’s not out of the question to believe that people pick up association with quick flashes of words — like rats — and it may have some effect on their thoughts at least in the next fraction of a second,” he says.

Making an Impression
Still, as Sharon Beatty, a marketing expert at the University of Alabama points out, the word “RATS” in the G.O.P. ad wasn’t exactly subliminal.

“You can actually see the word for a half second,” she says.

Instead, she classifies the “RATS” appearance as a possible use of so-called low-involvement advertising. This method, she explains, is pervasive in the advertising industry and involves flashing quick, but not unnoticeably quick images to create an impression on the viewer.

“Your brain just takes it in and says, ‘Yeah, I guess so,’” she says. “Your defenses don’t have time to activate.”

So could creators of the G.O.P. ad have intended such an effect? Pratkanis says it’s possible, since so many Americans seem to believe the technique works — and the creators may have been among them.

But Dave Stewart, a professor of marketing at the University of Southern California, remains skeptical.

“The biggest problem with advertising is it’s difficult to get people’s attention,” he says. “You have to hit them over the head with an idea to be effective and most advertising people know that.”