



Overcoming Confirmation Bias *And Preventing it with Smart Branding*

By Jean Van Rensselar

The psychological phenomenon of confirmation bias has significant implications for marketing and communications, but most people don't know what it is and---more importantly---how they can get prospects to move past it.

Confirmation bias is the tendency to favor information that confirms what you already believe, regardless of whether or not the information is accurate; and ignore alternatives that may be better. You could attribute confirmation bias to mental laziness or more generously to the limited human ability to process new information.

The more information we have to process in general, the more entrenched confirmation bias becomes. Given this, it's easy to see why it's becoming more and more of a marketing problem.

For companies that are well-branded, confirmation bias can work in their favor. The positive aspects of the brand are so entrenched in the minds of customers and prospects that they will overlook multiple mistakes and make it difficult for new competitors to enter the market.

On the other hand, confirmation bias makes it very difficult for unbranded organizations, suddenly dealing with a negative set of circumstances, to right themselves---especially if there are one or more competitors that people know and love.

Dealing with information that refutes what we believe is disruptive. Also called cognitive dissonance, most of us avoid it. But without embracing, evaluating, and resolving it, we would never grow. For example, if you continue to believe that you're a great conversationalist, despite the fact that people tend to avoid you at social functions, you'll never make the effort to become a great conversationalist.

The result of confirmation bias is that rather than harvesting evidence, we tend to cherry pick and interpret it in a way that fits what we already believe. This isn't an isolated phenomenon limited to a small group of people, it permeates all of the information we process to some degree. It leads to unwanted birthday presents and international wars.

Another example is financial investing. People who invest in a particular stock will tend to pump up positive news about that company and downplay negative news. If a financial advisor says, "It's a great stock right now, but there may be some problems in the next year or so." People tend to focus on the "great stock" part and tune out the "problems" part. How much they do this depends on the stakes. This is another important point about confirmation bias: it's more prevalent in situations where the stakes are low. This means it has a greater effect on companies that rely on high volume sales of moderately priced products and services.

Confirmation bias is famously a problem with jurors who sincerely believe they are approaching a case objectively. They are asked to evaluate guilt or innocence based solely on the evidence, but that is an impossible task. We are all biased all the time to some degree.

The goal of attorneys is to present enough evidence to overcome that bias. They do that by identifying likely biases, neutralizing those biases with indisputable facts, and presenting new evidence favorable to their positions. This is exactly how to *market-out* confirmation bias.

1. Identify Key Biases

Start with identifying what goes into the buying decision for the category of products and services that you offer. You probably already know this. For each of those factors, pinpoint the possible biases. For example, if one of the aspects of a buying decision for athletic shoes is: good support, the associated bias may be that only the leading brand offers adequate support.

2. Neutralize Specific Biases with Irrefutable Facts

In the example above, you'll want to address support aggressively with facts. Don't say "Our shoes feature excellent support." In the face of confirmation bias, this means nothing. Instead, specifically address the issue of support with irrefutable facts: "In a study of 38 elite athletes, 93 percent said our insoles provide better support than the leading brand." Add a money back guarantee and you're golden.

3. Present New Evidence Favorable to Your Brand

Once you've neutralized existing biases, you'll have a short window to brand quickly and aggressively. This is the time to pour everything you can into a proactive and intense marketing campaign. Consider that you may not get this chance a second time.

People demand a high standard of evidence for unpalatable ideas and a low standard for preferred ideas. Preferred ideas need to meet the "Can I believe this?" standard while unpalatable ideas need to meet the higher "Must I believe this?" standard. Once you've neutralized specific biases, you've overcome the *Must I believe this?* standard. Your goal is to bring prospects to the point of *Can I believe this?* and even further to *I want to believe this*—which is the point where the confirmation bias swings in your favor.

Confirmation bias has its roots in the well-established fact that people tend to weigh the information they receive first most heavily. For marketing, this means that it's much better to proactively present positive information about your product or service than try to counteract negative information. Poorly branded or unbranded companies are perfect targets. Too often they attempt to launch their first branding campaign in response to a negative event and the additional publicity only makes things worse.

To overcome confirmation bias, you need to identify key biases, neutralize them with undisputable facts, and then quickly follow that with a flood of new evidence that's favorable to your brand. You can avoid all this if you create and maintain a strong brand in the first place. It's your protection against confirmation bias.

About the Author

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