



## ***Worm-holes of the Mind.***

By Max Sutherland

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The classic Avis campaign "*we're #2... We try harder*" resonated because it capitalized on the widespread belief that monopolies and big companies are complacent, while those that are still trying to get to the top, will try harder. That campaign worked because that belief about monopolies, if not already salient, was brought to mind by the Avis campaign.

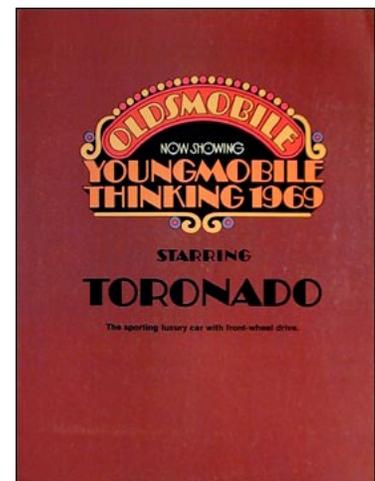


When Avis launched that famous campaign, Hertz was the most popular rental brand. Had Avis simply asserted it was better without that integrative link, it would have invited rejection. When new information activates conflicting knowledge, it invites rejection.

We saw in my last column that when positioning a new brand or repositioning an old one, it pays to think 'information intercourse'. New information wants to enjoin with other information and the secret to making new information penetrate is to provide that integrative link (see "[Information Intercourse: Making Messages Penetrate](#)").

### **Inviting Rejection**

The power of conflicting associations in inviting rejection of new information is considerable. It compelled GM recently to abandon Oldsmobile, the 100-year-old brand. The first syllable, 'old', at the beginning of the name Oldsmobile activates associations in conflict with the sporty, upper-middle-price range cars that GM tried to market under that brand name. Since the 1960's, ad campaigns to persuade people to ignore this have failed. One campaign even asserted it was 'the youngmobile' (see ad). GM finally gave up and have recently taken the decision to phase out the brand.

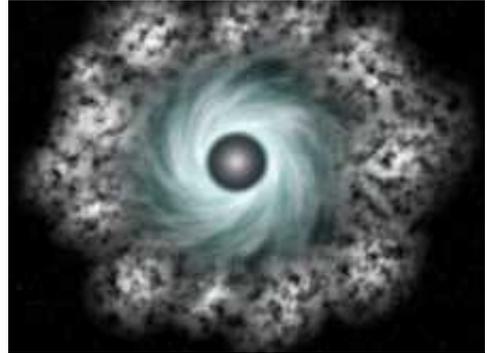


Here's another example from half a century ago when conflicting associations forced manufacturers to put suds into detergents. Suds were not in the original detergents and are totally unnecessary for the product to work. However, before detergent, we washed dishes in soapy water in the sink and the lack of suds told us when things were *not working* and when more soap needed to be added. Without foam, detergent didn't seem to be working. It clashed with the etched-in experience in buyers' minds that suds equals 'working' and 'no suds' means 'not working'. Manufacturers quickly recognized this and added suds to the new product to make it acceptable.

Convincing people that detergents don't need suds or that old means new is like trying to argue that black is white or that Paris Hilton's IQ is larger than her shoe size. New information craves integration and when it triggers inconsistent associations, it invites rejection.

## Latent Knowledge = 'Worm-holes'

But despite this, there are 'worm-holes' in the mind through which it is possible for even conflicting information to enter. They are created by latent knowledge. Knowledge that has been gained in the past becomes latent if not used, and dims to a distant memory. Such knowledge is still there but it becomes less readily accessible and creates a potential 'worm-hole'. This is an open portal through which inconsistent information can enter our brains because the mental consistency check only applies to knowledge that is activated.



When knowledge is reinforced and salient, it is part of the mental 'neighborhood watch' program. When it becomes latent and buried under layers of other knowledge it is not. Unless activated it remains quiescent and does not participate in this interleaving process: if it did the pearl industry would be in trouble.

It doesn't ever occur to us that a pearl is an oyster tumor? Ugh! What an ugly, conflict of associations that activates! Yet you had the knowledge; you just didn't make the connection previously. Latent knowledge does not crave integration unless it is activated.

So, we can see now why the brain, which strives for consistency, can nevertheless become compartmentalized and at times entertain conflicting associations that don't fit together. As one writer observes: "When you sit at your beautiful Yamaha piano, you don't feel that the piano is very racy because there are motorbikes sold under the same brand name."<sup>i</sup>

### Conclusion:

Our minds strive for integration and they tend to reject anything inconsistent, but the integrative process seems to go AWOL when it comes to latent knowledge. The interleaving process that is so fundamental to the way our brains work, only works while the cortical boss is looking.

So, don't let 'worm-holes' develop. Advertising reminders are the crucial defense (see [Warfare Strategy in the Battle for the Mind](#)). Without them information erodes back into the recesses of the mind. And when hard-won associations go latent, it creates an opportunity for competitors to exploit and for *inconsistent* information to get through.

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<sup>i</sup> Mueller-Heumann, Guenther (2001). "What's in a brand name?". [HAllaboutbranding.com](http://HAllaboutbranding.com)H.