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How Does Reinterpretation Influence Our First Impressions?

Thomas C. Mann, PhD Candidate, and Melissa J. Ferguson, PhD

Common wisdom and psychological research alike advise that it is critically important to make a good first impression: the human mind is adept at drawing inferences about others from even the slimmest amount of information about their actions or appearance, and these impressions can impact decision-making. Our first impressions of others can influence our decisions and behavior even if we did not intend to form an impression at all, or cannot recall the details that led to the impression. In addition, first impressions may be difficult to fully “undo” once they take hold – an intuition captured by the popular phrase “You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” If they are in fact difficult to change, it makes it all the more necessary to set a positive impression from the start. When the stakes are as high as they are for agents, buyers, and sellers involved in the real estate market, learning how (and if) negative first impressions can be undone is of the utmost importance. In our work (Mann & Ferguson, 2015; Mann, Cone, & Ferguson, 2015), we have found that bad first impressions can sometimes be effectively reversed through reinterpretation.

The “Stickiness” of First Impressions?

Some experimental studies have found that it is indeed difficult to overturn a first impression at every level. In experiments in which participants learned about a fictitious person or group of people portrayed initially as good or bad, subsequent efforts by the experimenters to “flip” these impressions (by telling participants that they changed their ways over time, or that the experimenter accidentally switched their descriptions) were effective in changing the impressions (evaluations of the targets as positive or negative) participants explicitly expressed toward the people. However, computer tasks measuring their more automatic reactions – termed “implicit evaluations” – showed persistent and robust effects of the first impression. That is, although their explicit judgments of the other people readily moved away from the first impression when new details came to light, their implicit evaluations did not (Gregg, Seibt, & Banaji 2006). Such implicit evaluations have been shown to have important consequences for decision-making and behavior (e.g., Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji 2009).
More recent work has shown that a positive first impression can be quickly undone by extreme, highly diagnostic negative information: when a previously liked person was revealed to participants to be a child molester or mutilator of small animals, even implicit evaluations of the person were readily reversed (Cone & Ferguson, 2015). However, learning that a moderately disliked person had heroically donated a kidney to a child he did not know merely reduced, but did not overturn, a negative first impression at the implicit level.

Overtaking Negative First Impressions with Reinterpretation

If highly diagnostic new details are capable of overturning first impressions, the difficulty of flipping a bad impression may be that often, negative information is seen as more important than positive information. In our recent work (Mann & Ferguson, 2015), we reasoned that a way around this might be to try to undermine the initial negative impression by fundamentally reframing the meaning of the details that went into forming it in the first place. That is, rather than encouraging participants to simply reject or forget a bad first impression, or leave it unaddressed while trying to focus participants on new, positive details about a person, we gave participants a reason to see the earlier details in a new light, such that those details now implied a positive as opposed to a negative impression.

The Francis West Studies

To demonstrate that it is possible for reinterpretation to effectively reverse even negative implicit evaluations of a person, we conducted a series of experiments in which participants read a story about a fictitious individual named Francis West. In the story, Francis is described breaking into and causing much damage inside the homes of his neighbors, and removing precious items from their bedrooms. This was sufficient to cause participants to form both negative explicit evaluations and negative implicit evaluations of Francis. Crucially, participants in the critical condition were then given one more detail about Francis: he had actually broken into the homes because he saw that they were on fire, and the “precious things” he took from the bedrooms were the young children of his neighbors who he knew to be trapped inside. This new detail was effective in driving a reversal of both explicit and implicit impressions of Francis. A different version of the story was not similarly effective: When Francis was described performing an unrelated heroic action (jumping down onto subway tracks to save a baby just as a train approached), a negative implicit impression was still present, though somewhat weakened. Follow-up studies showed that being able and willing to think through how the new revelations changed the meaning of the earlier details was of critical importance in driving impression updating.
Conclusion

Contrary to the popular phrase “You never get a second chance to make a first impression,” our work has found that it is sometimes possible to undo a bad first impression. In our studies, the key to undermining a negative impression, even at the level of automatic reactions, was to provide a compelling reason for participants to see the details that had been the basis of the negative impression in the first place in a new, positive light. Though no work has yet applied these findings to the real estate industry or to property, it may be the case that real estate agents could productively draw from these findings.

Psychological work suggests that even if potential buyers claim to be no longer bothered by a feature of a property that previously put them off, it is possible for such prior concerns continue to impact their decisions at an implicit level, making the question of how to effectively undermine such first impressions more important than it might first seem.

If a potential buyer forms a negative first impression of a property due to some particular feature, our findings suggest that a seller may be well-advised to highlight ways in which that feature can be reinterpreted as positive, rather than (or in addition to) calling attention to all of the positive elements of the property that might outweigh that negative. Future studies may test such applications of our work to the real estate industry.

Recommended Reading


References


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