

Singapore Property News

Saturday, April 26, 2008

[RealEdge] BT : Beware of those trigger tricks

Business Times - 26 Apr 2008

Beware of those trigger tricks

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TURKEY mothers are good mothers. They are loving, watchful and protective. They spend much of their time tending, warming, cleaning and huddling their young beneath them. But there's something odd about how they identify their chicks - they go by their 'cheep-cheep' sound.

Other features, such as the chicks' smell, touch or appearance, seem to play minor roles in the mothering process. If a chick makes the cheep-cheep noise, its mother will care for it. If not, the mother will ignore it - or sometimes kill it.

The extreme reliance of maternal turkeys upon this one sound was dramatically illustrated by animal behaviourist MW Fox in an experiment involving a mother turkey and a stuffed polecat.

For a mother turkey, a polecat is a natural enemy whose approach is greeted with squawking, pecking and clawing rage. The experiments found that a stuffed polecat, when drawn by a string to a mother turkey, suffered an immediate and furious attack. But when the same stuffed replica carried inside it a small recorder that played the cheep-cheep sound of a baby turkey, the mother not only accepted the oncoming polecat but gathered it underneath her. When the machine was turned off, the polecat model again drew a vicious attack.

Mother turkeys are not unique in that they have this automatic reaction to the cheep-cheep sound. Ethologists, who study animals in their natural settings, have identified such regular, blindly mechanical patterns of action in many species.

Called fixed-action patterns, they can involve intricate sequences of behaviour, such as entire courtship or mating rituals. A fundamental characteristic of these patterns is that the behaviours they comprise occur in virtually the same fashion and in the same order every time. It is almost as if the patterns were recorded on tapes within the animals. When a situation calls for courtship, a courtship tape is played; when a situation calls for mothering, a maternal behaviour tape is played.

The triggers that activate 'the tapes' are usually a tiny feature. For example a male robin will attack a clump of robin red breast feathers, seeing it as another male robin trying to invade its space. It will, however, ignore a perfect stuffed replica of a male robin without red breast feathers.

There are a few things to realise there. First, the automatic, fixed-action patterns of animals work very well most of the time. For example, because only normal healthy turkey chicks make the peculiar sound of baby turkeys, it makes sense for mother turkeys to respond maternally to that single cheep-cheep noise. Animals may not have the brain power to analyse too many things from the external environment. By reacting to just that one stimulus, the average mother turkey will almost always behave correctly. It takes a trickster like a scientist to make her tape-like response seem silly.

Humans have pre-programmed tapes as well. And although they usually work to our advantage, the trigger features that activate them can dupe us into playing the wrong tapes at the wrong time.

Increasingly, we are relying more on these pre-programmed tapes because we are living in a time when information is literally exploding. In general, we just don't have the time or the capacity to fully analyse every situation in its totality. So like the lower animals, we will increasingly focus on a single - usually reliable - feature of the situation.

This means that those who understand these pre-programmed tapes of ours can, like an ethologist, create false trigger features and trick us into complying with what they want us to do.

Being aware of what are the 'trigger features' that compel us to do certain things enables us to be more alert and not be conned into doing silly things.

In his book 'Influence, Science and Practice', Robert Cialdini, professor of psychology at Arizona State University, listed the trigger features in humans.

Expensive = good

For things that we have scant knowledge of, we will think the more expensive it is, the better its quality. A case in point. Prof Cialdini tells of

a friend who owns an Indian jewellery store in Arizona. The friend had some turquoise jewellery that was of good quality for the prices she asked. She displayed them prominently during the peak tourist season, even asking her staff to 'push' the items hard. But sales remained poor.

Finally, before leaving for a trip, she scribbled an exasperated note to her head saleswomen: 'Everything in this display case, price x 1/2,' hoping to just be rid of the offending pieces, even if at a loss. When she returned a few days later, she was not surprised to find that every article had been sold. But she was shocked to discover that, because the employee had read the '1/2' in her scrawled message as a '2', the entire allotment was sold at twice the original price.

Closer to home, Chew Hua Seng of Raffles Education also stumbled on the perception of most that expensive equals good. When he started the design school in Shanghai in 1994, it was struggling to get students and the fees couldn't even cover the costs. Then Mr Chew decided to double the fees, and lo and behold, the number of students doubled too. 'We found that we could actually make money (in Shanghai),' he said.

Similarly at his school in Singapore, after raising the course fees, the number of students increased.

The flip side of expensive equals good is that we generally associate cheap with poor quality. So most investors would deem penny stocks to be of poor quality. 'It is cheap for a reason,' one would think. But while this may generally be the case, it is not always.

Rule of reciprocity

Most of us are socially conditioned to follow this rule - that we should try to repay, in kind, what another person has provided us. Somebody invites you to their party, you invite them the next time you have one. Someone does you a favour, you return the favour in future.

Using this rule, donation seekers like that of the Hare Krishna Society significantly increased the funds they collected by first giving passers-by a 'gift' - a book, or a flower. The passers-by then felt obliged to contribute to the society.

Marketeers employ this tactic as well. Amway Corporation manufactures and distributes household and personal-care products. It had a programme in which it instructed its sales people to leave a collection of its products with a housewife for 24, 48 or 72 hours at no cost or obligation. The housewife was told to 'just use the products'. As it turned out, many of the housewives yielded to a sense of obligation and ordered the products they tried.

Here in Singapore, there are places that offer free body massages or makeover sessions in the hope of obligating consumers to sign up for

their packages.

A lesser request

We generally try to be polite and most of us don't like to say 'no' to others. One of the ways to get others to accede to your request is to first ask a bigger favour, and if it is turned down, ask another smaller favour. Chances are, the smaller favour will be given.

For example, if you are approached by a 12-year-old to buy his fun fare booklet for \$20, you may say 'no', But what if he then said: 'If you don't want to buy any tickets, how about buying some of our chocolate bars? They're \$1 each.' Most people would buy one or two bars.

Meanwhile, we are also likely to agree to the requests of people who are similar to us, who we like or who are seen to be in a position of authority.

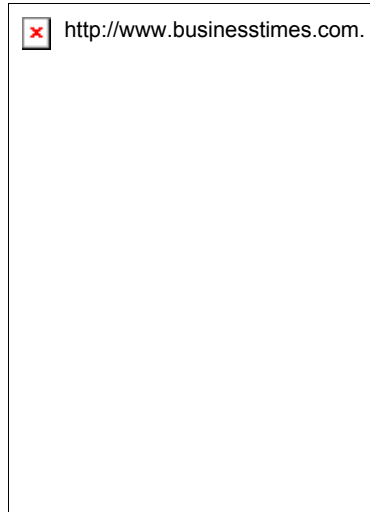
So clever salespeople will tell you they are from your same home-town or share the same interest as you. This will increase the likelihood of you buying from them. Television commercials will get actors to don a doctor's coat and tell you the benefits of their products. We are more likely to do what a person in uniform tells us to do than a person in ordinary clothes.

And finally, we are compelled to treasure something more when we think that it is scarce or when others are competing for it. Marketers know that perfectly well.

That's why you see advertisements for limited sets, or for a limited time only. A friend told me this week that she parted with several thousand dollars to sign up for a yoga package because the offer was available only at that instant. If she had walked away and returned later in the day, she wouldn't have been able to get that special deal any more.

Leslie Loh of System Access also understood that one gets the highest price in a competitive situation, which was why he invited several parties to bid simultaneously for his company in 2006.

Indeed, many of the situations I have outlined above are encountered frequently in everyday life - including when it comes to investing. So the golden rule should be: Stop and think.



Expensive equals good? Raffles Education's Mr Chew found that at his schools in Shanghai and Singapore, after raising the course fees, the number of students increased

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