

Expectation Effect

A phenomenon in which perception and behavior changes as a result of personal expectations or the expectations of others.

The expectation effect refers to ways in which expectations affect perception and behavior. Generally, when people are aware of a probable or desired outcome, their perceptions and behavior are affected in some way. A few examples of this phenomenon include:¹

Halo Effect—Employers rate the performance of certain employees more highly than others based on their overall positive impression of those employees.

Hawthorne Effect—Employees are more productive based on their belief that changes made to the environment will increase productivity.

Pygmalion Effect—Students perform better or worse based on the expectations of their teacher.

Placebo Effect—Patients experience treatment effects based on their belief that a treatment will work.

Rosenthal Effect—Teachers treat students differently based on their expectations of how students will perform.

Demand Characteristics—Participants in an experiment or interview provide responses and act in ways that they believe are expected by the experimenter or interviewer.

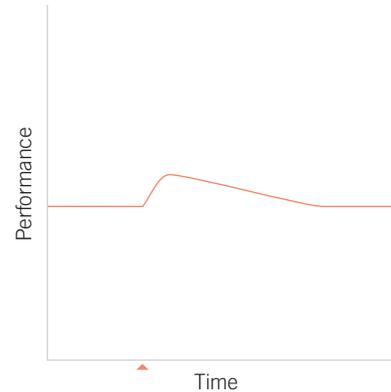
The expectation effect demonstrates that expectations can greatly influence perceptions and behavior. For example, tell a large group of people that a new product will change their lives, and a significant number will find their lives changed—the belief is simply a device that helps create the change. Once a person believes something will happen, the belief alone creates that possibility. Unfortunately, this can have a negative impact on the ability to accurately measure a design's success. Since designers are naturally biased toward their designs, they often unintentionally influence test subjects through words or actions, or may omit certain results in order to corroborate their expectations. Test subjects often respond by seeking to meet the expectations communicated to them.

Consider the expectation effect when introducing and promoting a design. When trying to persuade, set expectations in a credible fashion for the target audience rather than letting them form their own unbiased conclusions. When evaluating a design, use proper test procedures to avoid biases resulting from the expectation effect.

See also Exposure Effect, Framing, and Uncertainty Principle.

¹ Seminal works on the expectation effect include *The Human Problems of an Industrial Civilization* by Elton Mayo, Macmillan, 1933; “The Effect of Experimenter Bias on the Performance of the Albino Rat” by Robert Rosenthal and Kermit Fode, *Behavioral Science*, 1963, vol. 8, p. 115–118; “Teachers’ Expectancies: Determinants of Pupils’ IQ Gains” by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson, *Psychological Reports*, vol. 19, p. 115–118. For a nice review of the placebo effect, see *The Placebo Effect: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* edited by Anne Harrington, Harvard University Press, 1999.

The expectation effect can influence perception and behavior, but the changes are temporary. For example, the marker along the time axis indicates the point at which an expectation was set. A change in performance may be observed as a result (e.g., increased productivity) but usually reverts back to baseline.



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A credible presentation will generate an expectation effect in about 30 percent of any given audience. Keeping the claims and outcomes vague often helps—a believing person is biased to interpret ambiguous effects in accordance with their expectations. This technique was used to sell snake oil solutions, and is still widely used to sell astrology, psychic predictions, and things such as fad diets.



SAGITTARIUS

November 23–December 21

It's a favorable time for real estate, investments, and moneymaking opportunities to be successful. Romance could develop through social activities or short trips. Don't expect new acquaintances to be completely honest about themselves. Your lucky day this week will be Sunday.