

Exposure Effect

Repeated exposure to stimuli for which people have neutral feelings will increase the likeability of the stimuli.¹

The exposure effect occurs when stimuli are repeatedly presented and, as a result, are increasingly well liked and accepted. For example, the more a song or slogan is repeated, the more popular it is likely to become; a phenomenon exploited by both radio and television networks. The exposure effect applies only to stimuli that are perceived as neutral or positive. Repeated exposures to an offending stimulus may actually amplify the negative perception, rather than remedy it. The exposure effect is observed with music, paintings, drawings, images, people, and advertisements.²

The strongest exposure effects are seen with photographs, meaningful words, names, and simple shapes; the smallest effects are seen with icons, people, and auditory stimuli. The exposure effect gradually weakens as the number of presentations increases—probably due to boredom. Complex and interesting stimuli tend to amplify the effect, whereas simple and boring stimuli tend to weaken it. Interestingly, the longer a stimulus is exposed, the weaker the exposure effect. The strongest effect is achieved when exposures are so brief or subtle that they are subliminal (not consciously processed), or when they are separated by a delay.³

Familiarity plays a primary role in aesthetic appeal and acceptance; people like things more when frequently exposed to them. For example, the initial resistance by many people to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was primarily caused by a lack of familiarity with its minimalist, abstract design. Similar resistance was experienced by Pablo Picasso with his Cubist works, Gustave Eiffel with the Eiffel Tower, Frank Lloyd Wright with the Guggenheim Museum, and many others whose works are today widely accepted as brilliant and beautiful. As the level of exposure to these works increased with time, familiarity with the works also increased and resulted in greater acceptance and popularity.

Use the exposure effect to strengthen advertising and marketing campaigns, enhance the perceived credibility and aesthetic of designs, and generally improve the way people think and feel about a message or product. Keep the exposures brief, and separate them with periods of delay. The exposure effect will be strongest for the first ten exposures; therefore, focus resources on early presentations for maximum benefit. Expect and prepare for resistance to a design if it is significantly different from the norm.

See also Classical Conditioning, Cognitive Dissonance, Framing, Priming, and Stickiness.

¹ Also known as *mere exposure effect*, *repetition-validity effect*, *frequency-validity effect*, *truth effect*, and *repetition effect*.

² The seminal application of the exposure effect was in early 20th-century propaganda—see, for example, *Adolf Hitler: A Chilling Tale of Propaganda* by Max Arthur and Joseph Goebbels, Trident Press International, 1999. The seminal empirical work on the exposure effect is “Attitudinal Effects of Mere Exposure” by Robert Zajonc, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology Monographs*, vol. 9(2), p. 1–27.

³ See, for example, “Exposure and Affect: Overview and Meta-Analysis of Research, 1968–1987” by Robert F. Bornstein, *Psychological Bulletin*, 1989, vol. (106), p. 265–289.

