Confirmation Bias and HCP Messaging Effectiveness: the Science of Persuasion

In the 1950s there was a doomsday cult lead by a Dorothy Martin, a suburban housewife. Martin claimed to have received messages from The Guardians, a superior group of beings from the planet Clarion.

The messages predicted that on December 21, 1954 a flood would submerge North America and destroy the world. She formed an apocalyptic cult of otherwise unremarkable people around these beliefs. Members quit their jobs and sold their possessions in preparation.

On December 21, 1954 no such apocalypse occurred and Martin claimed that the world had been spared because of the "force of Good and light."

What makes this story fascinating is that three social psychologists, led by Leon Festinger, had infiltrated the group and ultimately wrote a book called When Prophecy Fails which chronicled the run-up to, and then the aftermath of, Martin's science fiction.

The famous result: many of the group, when faced with conclusive evidence that their beliefs were wrong, doubled down and adhered to them even more strongly and began even more fervent proselytizing.

This is a powerful example of what, in behavioral science, has come to be understood as confirmation bias: the tendency to disregard, or even actively disbelieve, evidence that contradicts our pre-established beliefs. In fact, there is substantial evidence that there is valence to this behavioral bias: that the more extreme one's beliefs, the "further from the pack" one is, the less that facts can dislodge those beliefs.
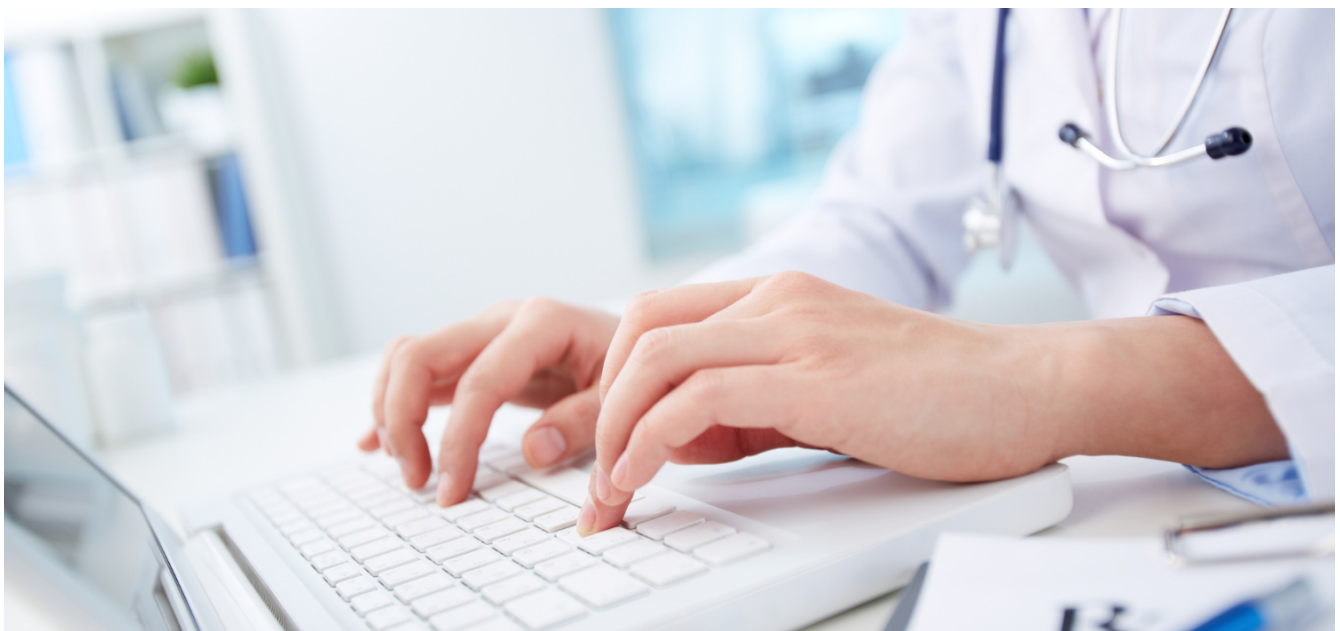
This is exactly what we mean by a System 1 bias: rather than objectively and dispassionately evaluating the evidence to align our beliefs with reality, our heuristics attempt to protect the effort we have put into building those beliefs in the first place. That is, it is easier to align our perception of reality with our pre-existing beliefs than it is to update our beliefs to align with the facts.

What does all this have to do with HCP messaging effectiveness in healthcare?

Very often HCP messaging revolves around some central informational payload – typically clinical trial endpoints or real-world evidence that present objective and dispassionate facts about a treatment in comparison with placebo or some other head-to-head comparator. The objective of these messages is to persuade HCPs to adopt the product into their treatment paradigm. The assumption is that HCPs will dispassionately assess the claims being made and decide that the new product is indeed better.

However, in many cases this turns out not to happen at all. Confirmation bias kicks in and HCPs protect their pre-existing beliefs by discounting otherwise compelling evidence.

BEESY Strategy has conducted numerous message testing studies using our Elements of Persuasion framework and have encountered direct evidence of this several times. A classic example is when a market is comprised of Brand X Loyalists, Brand Y Loyalists, and Splitters. In one such case we studied Brand X was trying to convince Brand Y Loyalists that Brand X was better. The manufacturer of Brand X had invested in head-to-head clinical trials that statistically showed that Brand X was better than Brand Y in specific circumstances. Further, research showed that Brand Y Loyalists agreed that, in theory, such head-to-head data was very compelling. And yet, when Brand Y Loyalists were shown messages that contained the information that Brand X was better than Brand Y, they discounted those messages and found them unpersuasive.

Why? Because those HCPs had invested years in creating a belief set that included the fact that Brand Y was the better treatment. Hearing contradictory information implicitly suggested that their treatment decisions had been wrong for all those years. It was easier to discount the evidence than revise their beliefs.

As a result, one of the foundational recommendations BEESY makes is that when attempting to influence the beliefs of a loyalist, it is likely unwise to explicitly or implicitly criticize the treatment the loyalist is loyal to. It is better to simply relate facts about your own product.

Schedule a meeting
with BEESY today

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Learn more about how understanding the non-conscious elements of decision-making can advance your brand's goals.

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