

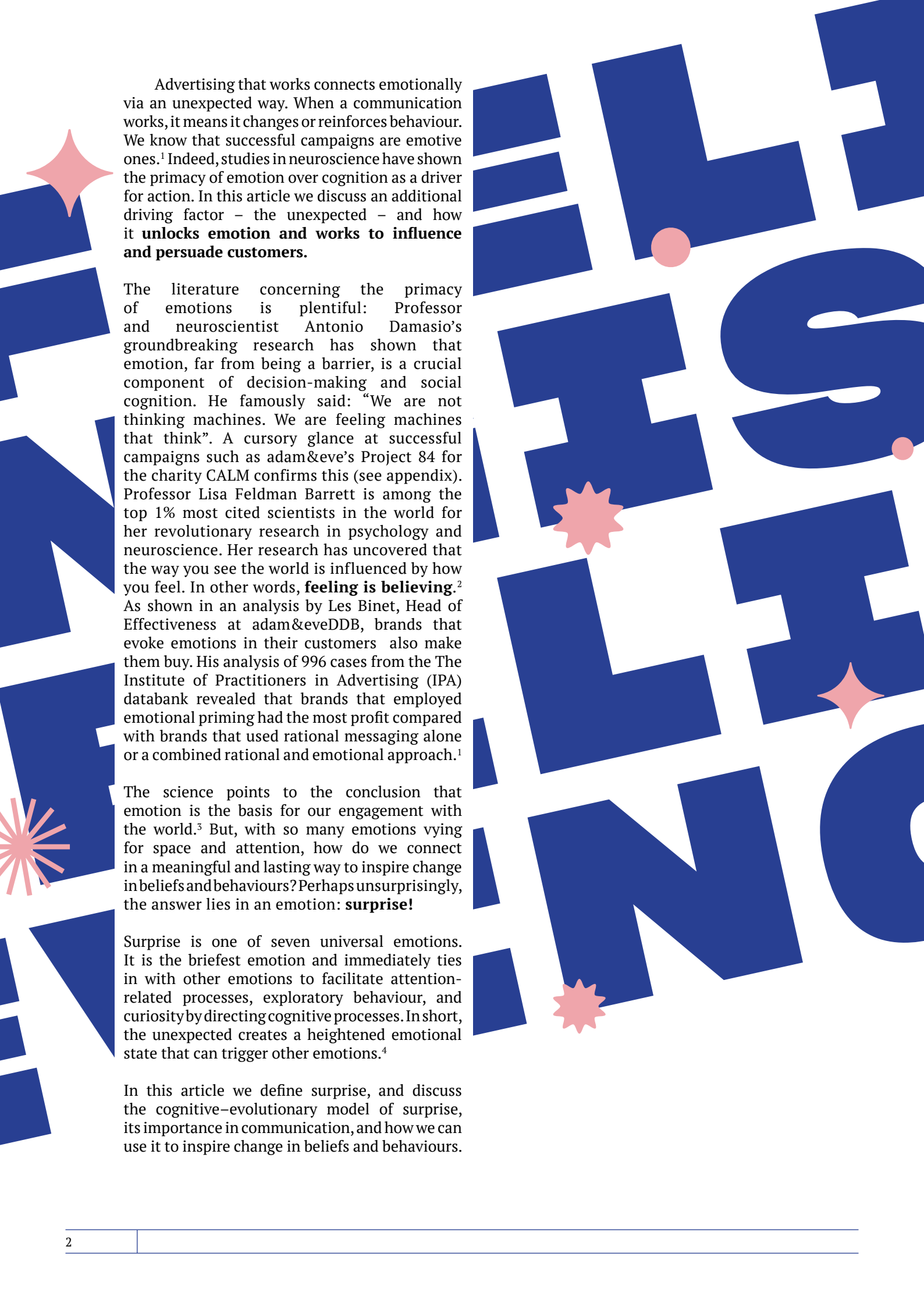
# HOW THE UNEXPECTED AND EMOTION WORK TO INFLUENCE BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

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**THE DDB REMEDY  
UNEXPECTED WORKS JOURNAL**

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Advertising that works connects emotionally via an unexpected way. When a communication works, it means it changes or reinforces behaviour. We know that successful campaigns are emotive ones.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, studies in neuroscience have shown the primacy of emotion over cognition as a driver for action. In this article we discuss an additional driving factor – the unexpected – and how it **unlocks emotion and works to influence and persuade customers.**

The literature concerning the primacy of emotions is plentiful: Professor and neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's groundbreaking research has shown that emotion, far from being a barrier, is a crucial component of decision-making and social cognition. He famously said: "We are not thinking machines. We are feeling machines that think". A cursory glance at successful campaigns such as adam&eve's Project 84 for the charity CALM confirms this (see appendix). Professor Lisa Feldman Barrett is among the top 1% most cited scientists in the world for her revolutionary research in psychology and neuroscience. Her research has uncovered that the way you see the world is influenced by how you feel. In other words, **feeling is believing.**<sup>2</sup> As shown in an analysis by Les Binet, Head of Effectiveness at adam&eveDDB, brands that evoke emotions in their customers also make them buy. His analysis of 996 cases from the The Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) databank revealed that brands that employed emotional priming had the most profit compared with brands that used rational messaging alone or a combined rational and emotional approach.<sup>1</sup>

The science points to the conclusion that emotion is the basis for our engagement with the world.<sup>3</sup> But, with so many emotions vying for space and attention, how do we connect in a meaningful and lasting way to inspire change in beliefs and behaviours? Perhaps unsurprisingly, the answer lies in an emotion: **surprise!**

Surprise is one of seven universal emotions. It is the briefest emotion and immediately ties in with other emotions to facilitate attention-related processes, exploratory behaviour, and curiosity by directing cognitive processes. In short, the unexpected creates a heightened emotional state that can trigger other emotions.<sup>4</sup>

In this article we define surprise, and discuss the cognitive–evolutionary model of surprise, its importance in communication, and how we can use it to inspire change in beliefs and behaviours.



# THE DEEPER WITHIN THE COMMONS OF SURPRISE

Descriptions of surprise in the literature are complex, and there is no consensus on what exactly surprise is. There are explanations based on distinctive emotional experiences,<sup>5</sup> violations of expectations or schema incongruity (see pg. 5),<sup>6</sup> low-probability events,<sup>7</sup> and explanatory need.<sup>8</sup>

Turning to a less scientific source, the Oxford English Dictionary defines surprise thus:<sup>9</sup>

1. An event, a piece of news, etc. that is unexpected or that happens suddenly
2. A feeling caused by something happening suddenly or unexpectedly
3. The use of methods that cause feelings of surprise

This lay understanding of the term broadly encompasses the ideas covered in the literature – for we intuitively know that no matter the mechanism, **surprise always contains an element of the unexpected.**

But what is the point of surprise? Why do we feel surprise? One way to answer this is to turn to evolutionary biology.



**FEELING IS  
BELIEVING**

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## The cognitive-evolutionary model of surprise

The cognitive–evolutionary model starts with the assumption that human perception, thought and action are controlled by complex, organised belief structures called schemas.<sup>10</sup>

A schema can be thought of as a representation of informal, unarticulated theories about objects, events, and situations. Schemas interpret the past and present, and predict future events – thus providing guidance for how to act. However, given that the environment is changing all the time, schemas have to be continuously monitored and updated accordingly.<sup>10</sup>

This cognitive–evolutionary model postulates that we all have an innate ‘surprise mechanism’ – a hardwired information-processing pathway that operates at an subconscious level and continuously and automatically compares current schemas with new information. If there is congruence between schema and input (i.e. new beliefs conform to existing ones), nothing changes. However, if the mechanism detects a discrepancy, it generates a signal of surprise.<sup>10</sup>

It is thought that if this signal exceeds a certain threshold, then ongoing information processing is automatically interrupted, attention is shifted to the unexpected event, and the unexpectedness signal becomes conscious as a feeling with the characteristics we are all familiar with: those of surprise. This process instigates an immediate reaction to the unexpected event and, provided there is enough motivation for an analysis of the event, an updating of the schema.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the behaviours that are elicited by surprise – reorientating the sense organs to the source of surprise, eyebrow-raising, etc. – all serve to enable and motivate these cognitive processes and the resulting short- and long-term adaptations.<sup>10</sup>

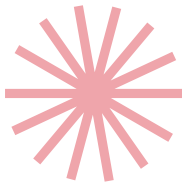
In summary, **unexpected events cause an automatic interruption of ongoing mental processes followed by a shift in attention to that event.** This is often followed by an analysis of the situation and schema (belief) revision.



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# The importance of surprise in communications



Surprise stimulates us to pay attention, engage, understand, and explain. As a result, **if you can craft communications that generate surprise, you can create a trigger that leads your audience to change their beliefs and attitudes.**<sup>11</sup> In short, you can sell a product. But this is dependent on triggering the right emotion. Remember, surprise creates a heightened emotional state that can trigger other emotions. Because surprise can be both positive and negative, eliciting the right emotions through surprise is critical.

But that's not the end of it. As surprises are emotionally intense, there is a tendency to want to share them. And because stories, pictures, and music can be widely shared, they can have a broad social influence. This means that surprising content spreads through networks and has a collective effect on society as well as an individual effect.<sup>11</sup>

If the surprise is elicited intentionally, for example by a company, then the generated delight can have lasting commercial effects through improving the customer-company relationship and increasing sales. It also creates the desire for repeated engagement (in anticipation of the reward of another surprise).<sup>12</sup>







## **CASE STUDY**

A study by Hutter & Hoffmann<sup>13</sup> examined the effect of placing advertisements that varied in the level of surprise they generated outside of a retail store. A survey of 2,500 people found that the most surprising advertisement doubled the rate of entry into the store vs when no advertisement was in place.

The most surprising advertisement was noticed by 43% of passersby, vs 11% in response to the least surprising advertisement. The effect of the unexpected advertisements was a 45% increase in store sales.





It may sound counterintuitive, but not all surprises are accidents. There are in fact **predictable ways for generating surprise**.<sup>11</sup> Otherwise, Pixar would not successfully release animations that tug at heart strings and bring forth floods of tears (and money) year after year. Surprise-generating techniques include:

### 1. Rhetorical tropes

- \* Hyperbole, metaphor, and paradoxes can generate surprise. As they require audiences to interpret them, communicators must be confident their audience has sufficient understanding to do so.
- \* Generally speaking, this technique is not suitable for communications that will be translated.

### 2. Minimally counterintuitive entities

- \* These are concepts that violate a few ontological expectations (ontology means the nature of being). They are memorable and have a lot of imaginative scope.
- \* Examples are commonly found in children's literature. They include talking rabbits (The Tale of Peter Rabbit) and toys who live secret lives (Toy Story).

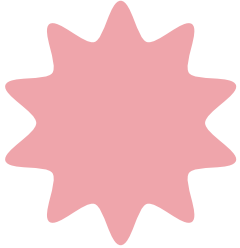
### 3. Repetition-break plot structure

- \* This consists of at least two repetitions and then a final contrasting event to generate surprise. This method teaches and generates the expectation and then violates it with a break.
- \* Well-known examples include The Three Little Pigs, Beethoven's fifth symphony (da da da dum...), MasterCard's Priceless campaign (8-speed bike, \$1,225. Shipping bike to Italy, \$235. Map of Tuscany, 9,000 Lira. 7 days without email: priceless).

### 4. Myth busting

- \* This consists of asking the audience to predict the answer to a question, then supplying the accurate answer. This method is a simple yet powerful way to dispel myths and convey counterintuitive information.

# conclusions



Surprises are memorable emotional experiences, linked to engagement and arousal. This means that emotions are heightened when there is an element of surprise. **The £20 you won on the lottery is more thrilling than the £20 you worked for.**

The emotion of surprise is a cue to sit up, pay attention, and take note. Getting people's attention is arguably the most important starting point for influencing them. Surprises and **unexpected events can shift attention and lead to a change of beliefs and behaviours, particularly when they tie into defined and pre-determined emotions.**

Contrary to expectation, there are techniques for generating surprise – from repetition-break plot structures to rhetorical tropes.



## Author's note

At DDB Remedy, we believe in the power of surprise and emotion. And we believe they work. Not out of blind faith, but because they are backed by science. **Advertising that works connects emotionally via an unexpected way.**

## Appendix

For the charity CALM: The Campaign Against Living Miserably, adam&eve partnered with renowned sculptor Mark Jenkins. Together, they created a striking visual installation in response to the shocking statistic that each week in the UK, 84 men tragically take their own lives. The work aimed to initiate the much-needed conversation and action around male suicide prevention and bereavement support. The campaign did just that and prompted the Government to appoint the first UK Minister for Suicide Prevention.



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