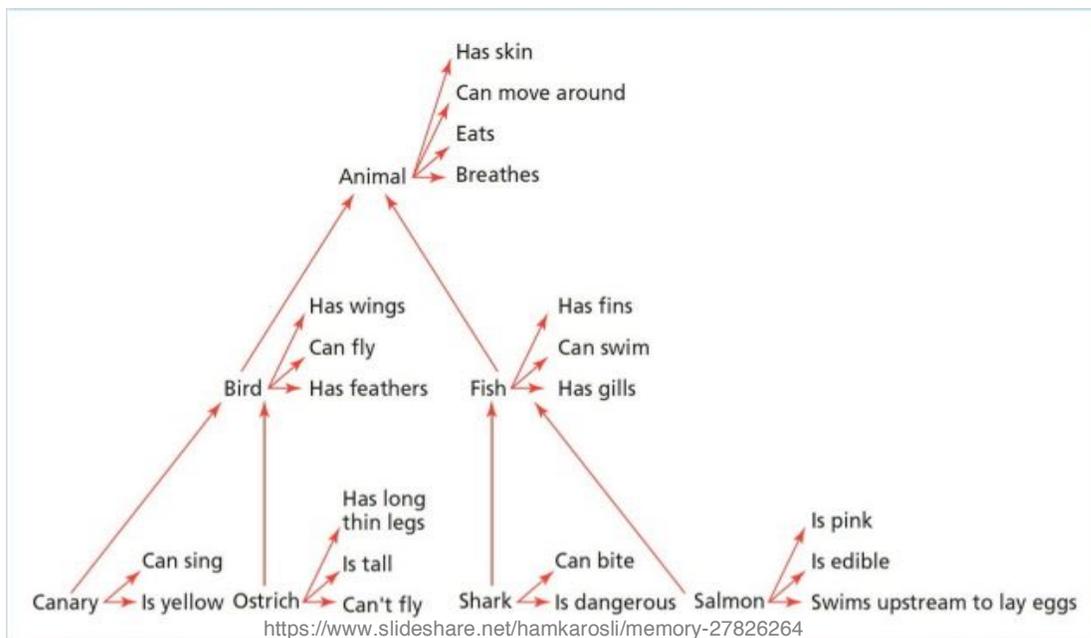


Get Consumers to Think of Your Product: Spreading Activation

Spreading activation, a term in psychology, describes how the brain moves through an entire network of ideas to retrieve specific information. According to this theory, we can think of some ideas more easily than others in a certain situation because our environment can trigger ideas closer in our “network” map. As a result, the ideas that are more available to us will be thought of faster.¹

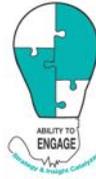


For example, in the figure above, there are seven nodes in this simplified “brain network” that are in a hierarchical structure: animal, bird, fish, canary, ostrich, shark and salmon. Each one has its specific features written next to the node. According to spreading activation theory, when you ask a person the following three questions,

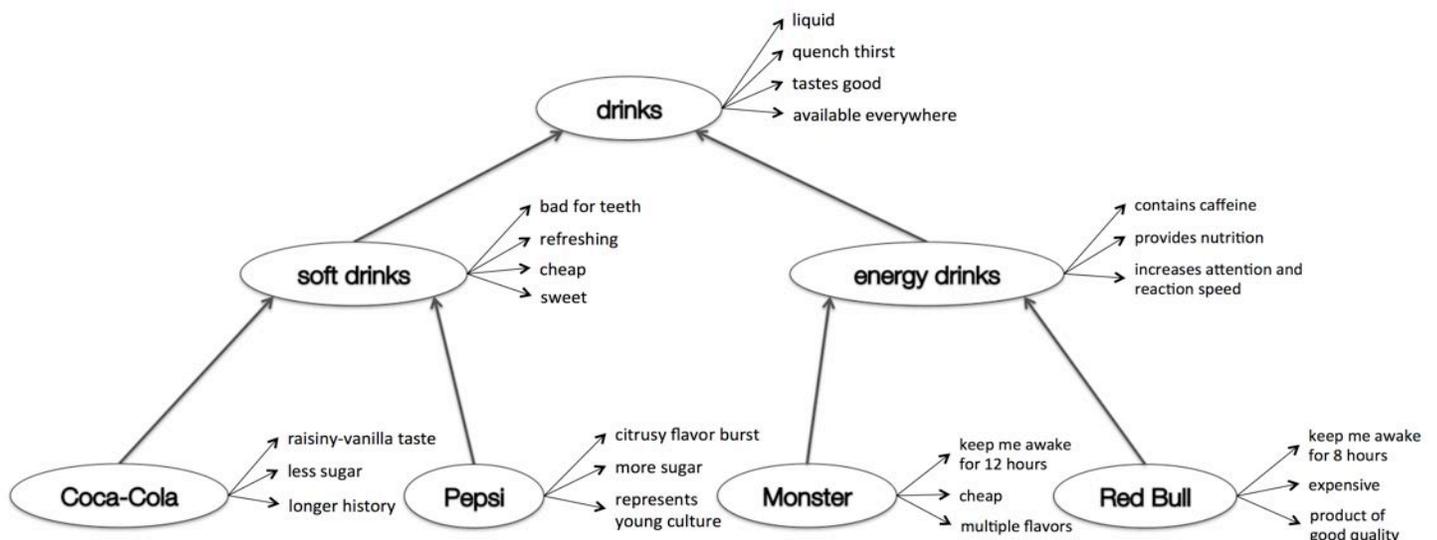
1. *Can a canary sing? (from the node Canary)*
2. *Does a canary have feathers? (from the node Bird)*
3. *Does a canary breathe? (from the node Animal)*

the response time will *increase* with each question, as the feature mentioned is further away on the map from the original idea (canary).

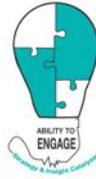
The theory of spreading activation in cognitive psychology can also be applied to the consumer-marketing world, particularly in communication strategy and advertising executions. Through the activation of the nodes near the target node we can establish a



connection with a brand. If we build communication around the features that consumers attribute to determined target nodes, we create a higher chance of consumers linking a feature to a brand (e.g. the feature of caffeine linked to the brand Red Bull). As shown in the figure below, when one thinks of an energy drink, the first feature thought of may be that it contains caffeine. This would be thought of before the idea of “thirst quenching”, as thirst quenching is a feature of “drinks,” not “energy drinks” and therefore takes longer to recall (feature is further away from the node of “energy drinks”). Therefore, if Red Bull wanted to be known for “quenching thirst,” it would communicate features of a “drink” (with associated features of liquid, quench thirst, tastes good, available everywhere). The brand would need to think about how to strategically communicate that the brand is tied to the “mother node” of “drinks” to create recall of a feature of drinks, such as “quench thirst.” The closer the tie is, the stronger the link between nodes, and the faster consumers will think of your brand vs a competitor (e.g. thinking of Red Bull faster than Monster when a consumer wants to “quench thirst”).



In execution, activating nodes and a consumer’s cognitive spreading activation can involve all touchpoints and include various senses (not just visual or written word communications). In a study looking at the influence of in-store music on wine selections, it was determined that music, with strong national associations, can activate related knowledge. This related national/ country knowledge correlated with consumers



purchasing wine from the country of music origin. As shown in the figure below, in a two-week period when the store played French music, the French wine sales increased. When the store played German music, German wine sales increased. This demonstrates that activating the idea or node that is closely related to the target idea or node, even subconsciously, can affect a consumer's decision-making and ultimate purchase.²

	French accordion music	German Bierkeller music
Bottles of French wine sold	40 (77%)	12 (23%)
Bottles of German wine sold	8 (27%)	22 (73%)

https://www.researchgate.net/figure/283464594_fig2_Fig-112-Number-and-in-brackets-of-bottles-of-French-vs-German-wine-sold-as-a

Spreading activation theory provides one possible explanation for the subconscious behaviors of consumers. It can be a powerful tool utilized by brands to affect consumer decision-making in favor of your product(s).

Want to understand how to get consumers to pick your product or services over competitors? Contact us at info@abilitytoengage.com or follow us on Twitter [@AbilityToEngage](https://twitter.com/AbilityToEngage)

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2. North, A. C., Hargreaves, D. J., & McKendrick, J. (1999). The influence of in-store music on wine selections. *Journal of Applied psychology*, 84(2), 271.