3. Mood and Persuasion

Advertisers often try to instill a good mood in their audience when selling their wares. For example, they spruce up their ads with pictures of beautiful beaches, attractive people, and pleasing music. Are these gambits effective? Are people more apt to be persuaded when they are in a good mood than when they are in a bad or neutral mood?

Research in this area indicates that the answer to this question is yes. Across a variety of attitude issues, people are more apt to be persuaded when they are in a good mood than when they are in a bad or more neutral mood. Moreover, this effect is quite general, occurring rather independently of how positive moods are induced. Watching a comedy, eating good food, or sitting in a comfortable and relaxed position have all been shown to increase persuasiveness (Albarracín & Kumkale, 2003; McGuire, 1985).

The dual-process model offers some insight into why people are more apt to be persuaded when they are in a good mood. Bless, Bohner, Schwarz, and Strack (1990) suggest that this occurs because people process information through the peripheral route when they are happy, and consequently are as easily influenced by weak arguments as strong ones. To test their ideas, they first asked college students to write about an important life event. Participants in the happy mood condition were asked to write about a happy life event, and participants in the sad mood condition were asked to write about a sad life event. Afterward, the students listened to a tape-recorded message that announced a fee increase at the student's university beginning next year. For half of the students, 11 strong arguments were used to justify the increase; for the remaining half, 11 weak arguments were used to justify the increase. Finally, students rated their approval for the impending increase.

Bless and colleagues hypothesized that happy moods initiate peripheral route processing and sad moods instigate central route processing. If so, we should expect to find that argument quality had little effect among happy participants but a substantial effect among sad participants. Figure 7.11 reveals just such a pattern. Sad participants were convinced by strong arguments but not by weak ones, but happy participants were just as convinced by weak arguments as they were by strong ones. These findings imply that people process information through the peripheral route when they are happy and through the central route when they are sad (see also Worth & Mackie, 1987).