Evolution's Gold Standard, by Diane Ackerman

Feeling low? According to a new study in the Journal of Consumer Research, when people feel bad, their sense of touch quickens and they instinctively want to hug something or someone. Tykes cling to a teddy bear or blanket. Itâ€™s a mammal thing. If young mammals feel gloomy, itâ€™s usually because theyâ€™re hurt, sick, cold, scared or lost. So their brain rewards them with a gust of pleasure if they scamper back to mom for a warm nuzzle and a meal. No need to think it over. All they know is that, when a negative mood hits, a cuddle just feels right; and if theyâ€™re upbeat and alert, then their eyes hunger for new sights and theyâ€™re itching to explore.
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Itâ€™s part of evolutionâ€™s gold standard, the old carrot-and-stick gambit, an impulse that evades reflection because it evolved to help infants thrive by telling them what to do â€" not in words but in sequins of taste, heartwarming touches, piquant smells, luscious colors.
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Back in the days before our kind knew what berries to eat, let alone which merlot to choose or HD-TV to buy, the question naturally arose: How do you teach a reckless animal to live smart? Some brains endorsed
correct, lifesaving behavior by doling out sensory rewards. Healthy food just tasted yummy, which is why we now crave the sweet, salty, fatty foods our ancestors did -- except that for them such essentials were rare, needing to be painstakingly gathered or hunted. The seasoned hedonists lived to explore and nuzzle another day -- long enough to pass along their snuggly, junk-food-bedeviled genes.
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As with so many other aspects of life, we adults still play by the rules we learned in infancy. Feel bad, need a hug. Scary movie, grab the hand of your date. Hungry, nosh on salty chips not kelp noodles.
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What does this have to do with â€œconsumer research?â€• Wouldnâ€™t you
know it, five experiments have pinpointed how to capitalize on the findings and connect with shoppers in different moods. Apparently, someone feeling low is likely to respond more to the velvety ooze of a hand lotion, while a cheerful person is likely to respond more to the productâ€™s shiny bottle and festive packaging.
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Is no mood safe from marketing and manipulation, you may wonder? Apparently not. They can ambush your animal senses, whatever state your brain may occupy, no matter if youâ€™re in the dumps or riding high. If the meringue-like hand cream doesnâ€™t entice you one day, the Eiffel Tower-shaped box might on another. [...]

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Can one outsmart the dictates of evolution? Sure, we do it all the time. Â [...] Are we aware of where our drives are driving us? Rarely.

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--Diane Ackerman, in _Evolution's Gold Standard_ [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/09/opinion/evolutions-gold-standard.html]

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