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The Power of Color

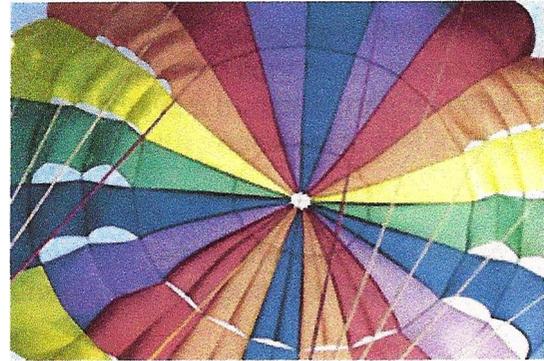
By WAm on September 12,2010 / Fall 2010, Psychobabble

Boost your performance, activate your imagination, and alter your mood with the right shades of courage.

By Carol Patton

When skydiving or base jumping, Italian Roberta Mancino sports red, yellow, or green - when she's not naked.

Buff-jumping aside, her preferences aren't an accident, says the 29-year-old professional skydiver, who set a world record last year as part of a 108-person skydiving formation. Whether it's her gut instinct, a simple preference, or the unconscious impact of her cultural heritage, Roberta says wearing certain colors can help elevate her mood or strengthen her concentration for more dangerous jumps.



"Yellow makes me feel happy," says Roberta, who splits her time between Venice Beach, California, and her hometown of Anzio, Italy. "Red makes me feel like I have more energy, which gives me more confidence in my jump, and green helps me feel more natural, peaceful, and relaxed."

Can color impact mood, abilities, and performance? Can people actually jump higher, run faster, or hike farther if they wear a red T-shirt instead of a green one? Maybe it was Superman's red cape - not kryptonite - that was actually the source of his powers. While the direct impact that colors may have on athletic performance is unclear, scientists have confirmed a link between color and cognitive function. Your brain ultimately impacts your performance, so despite our lack of understanding, there's little doubt that color also plays a role in how your body does its job - especially when you're pushing your limits.

In 2008, the University of British Columbia's Saunderson School of Business conducted an 18-month experiment with 700 undergraduate students. Dr. Juliet Zhu, associate professor of marketing, helped conduct the study dubbed "Blue or Red? Exploring the Effect of Background Color on Cognitive Task Performance."

"We were really interested in looking at how color affects people's performance in cognitive tasks," Dr. Zhu says. "We rationalized that due to our socialization, or the way we were brought up, color really has different associations in our mind."

Participants performed tasks using words or images displayed against red, blue, or neutral backgrounds on computer screens. With creative tasks, participants performed better with blue backgrounds. But when their tasks focused on recall and attention to detail, such as proofreading, they performed better with a red background.

Dr. Zhu says older studies had produced similar results. One found that writing with a red pen puts people in a different mind-set than writing with a blue pen. Another compared evenly matched athletes who were competing in boxing,

Tae Kwon Do, Greco-Roman wrestling, and freestyle wrestling during the 2004 Olympic Games. Those who wore red defeated their blue-clad opponents 60 percent of the time.

Perhaps color can be another tool in your backpack to enhance performance, change your mood, or stimulate creative thinking. Envision yourself in a red-tinted world, says Dr. Zhu, and it might be easier to conquer a mountain. Picture yourself in a sea of blue-toned hues, and innovative solutions - like where to hang your bear bag or how to fashion an emergency shelter - might seem like light work.

It might not be on your pre-hike checklist, but listening to your intuition when it comes to color-coding your adventure may make or break it. "What we have found in our research is that people are very much unconscious of the effect of color on their performance," Dr. Zhu says. "But somehow, people have a hunch as to how color affects their behavior. So don't try to think too hard about which color to use. Go with your hunch, and your gut feeling will tell you which color works for you."

Big retailers like Patagonia have also recognized the power of color. In early 2008, when the recession began its tight grip on the U.S. economy, the company's founder and owner, Yvon Chouinard, suggested using a palate of bright colors to raise customer spirits.

"He talked to our design team and said 'go to Sweden, look at the color of the houses,'" recalls Martijn Linden, Patagonia's creative director of product. "He said they paint their houses bright colors to make them feel better about the climate because it's dark there half the year."

This year's fashion and outdoor apparel color palette might have the same effect. Manufacturers are introducing bright and dynamic hues including volcanic blue, "ozonic" green, a light green that's called "light gecko," and a trifecta of pinkish shades (claret red, lotus flower, and pink camellia).

Consumers want color, says Linden, using an example noticed by Patagonia product managers last year to explain: Wholesale stores ordered one of the company's top-selling products, a down sweater-vest, and placed most of their orders for black. Not surprisingly, black became the most popular color for the season, followed by red, green, blue, and yellow, he says. But the color ranking was the opposite when consumers ordered the vests themselves from the company's website.

Although he's not certain why, even Linden himself prefers wearing bright colors. He owns two T-shirts in different shades of green, but he ends up wearing the brightest one when he runs.

"I'll go through the trouble of washing my [bright] green shirt at night so I can wear it again the next day," he says, adding that the other one sits in a drawer. "When I put the drab T-shirt on, I don't feel up to the challenge."

So what colors *ate* in your backpack or closet? Maybe it's time to pay more attention to the array, especially when you're shopping for gear that might push you to a new summit. You may not transform into Superman,

but color can give you the edge or energy when you need it most.

Now that's real power.

Your Performance Palette

"Visualize each color in the way smoke looks after a candle is blown out," says color expert Jami Lin, author of Color Alchemy (EarthDesign, Inc.; 2008). She says visualizing color might help you hit a jump, help a friend, or hone your fly-casting technique. "Imagine it dancing around your nose, coming into your nose, then dancing through your body," Lin says. "Breathe in, filling your lungs to capacity, then fill them a bit more. As you breathe out, exhale your toxic energy, stress, anxiety, fatigue, fear, or isolation as gray smoke."

Lin says that taking notice of the colors around you, assessing how you feel in the moment and taking a mental snapshot, can help you re-live highs and outwit lows in both mood and performance. "Save these mental snapshots on your brain's hard drive," she says. "Whenever you need to recall [these] feelings, you can bring that visualization back."

Each color has specific performance-enhancing attributes, so pick the right one for your adventure attitude. No matter your agenda, there's a color-coded snapshot you can keep on hand - or in your head - that'll put you in the right frame of mind to boost your performance. Narrow down the color of your adventure attitude with this choose-your-own chart:

You've been looking forward to this good hike all week. What did you have in mind for your moment?

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Get a deeper connection with nature by visualizing purple-hued scenes of lavender blooms or a pre-dawn sky

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Red will boost your energy and keep you fired up. Picture oxygen-rich blood pumping through your system, or volcanic bursting red-hot lava.

Go green and think of forested canopies or grassy hilltops for a stand-by way to improve your balance.

Watery scenes of shorelines or deep-sea swimming are a sure-fire way to increase calming and relaxation.