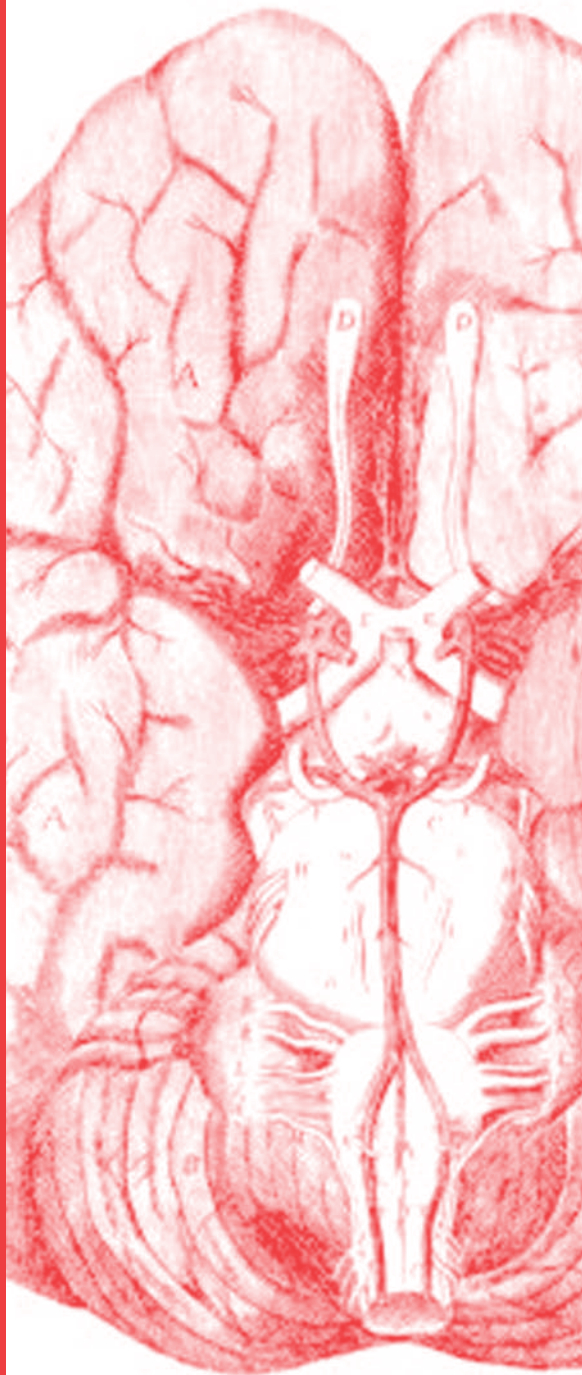


EMOTIONALLY CHARGED

WHY RATIONAL-BASED
COMMUNICATIONS APPROACHES
UNDERPERFORM FOR MARKETERS

BY ZAIN RAJ AND MARK DOMINIAK



“Truly successful decision making relies on a balance between deliberate and instinctive thinking.”

—Malcolm Gladwell
*Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*³

The business world has evolved to a point where decision making has become extremely deliberate, and that deliberate temperament has had a profound impact on marketing and communications.

Decision makers from c-level executives through the ranks of communications practitioners continue to push for more impact from efforts. Deliberate thinking fuels marketing and communication practices geared to maximizing ROI. Practices like six sigma, quantitative research, rigorous copy testing and econometric modeling have become commonplace. In an increasingly complex world, companies gravitate toward communication efforts that are managed in the most measured and rational fashion possible. The unforgiving financial marketplace demands nothing less.

A GUT FEELING SOMETHING IS AMISS

But has the focus on the deliberate violated Gladwell’s reliance on a balance with the instinctive? Instinctively, it seems so. Consumers attacked with deliberate, rational, statistically engineered messages are, in fact, wonderfully human. The consumer’s internal, natural decision making process continues to follow Gladwell’s balance. It is deliberate and instinctive. It is rational and emotional.

Instinct tells us something is being left on the table. Marketers have begun to realize that Gladwell’s balance is being violated. What should marketers do now?

- Assess the current plight they face in their quest to meaningfully communicate with consumers and examine why they have reached a dead end with long-standing approaches.
- Consider a new understanding of the human cognition process and how it can apply to human behavior in a marketing environment.
- Explore the potential marketing opportunities this process opens up, backed by metrics and implications that flow from this alternative point of view.

THE NEEDLE IN THE HAYSTACK

Media delivery forms and technology have exploded as traditional media continues to fragment. Consumers are blessed with a vast array of media choices, but this media kaleidoscope has been disastrous for marketers.

The content explosion has created three phenomena:

1. Individual medium audiences are shrinking, forcing marketers to buy more to achieve mass reach.
2. Marketing messages have swollen to fill the newly created media landscape, creating cluttered communication environments.
3. Consumers have disengaged. Inundated with messages and choice, they simply tune out what they perceive as superfluous, redirecting their attention or electing to use TiVo.

None of this is good news for marketers conditioned over the years to use standard marketing and media approaches. While some marketers are evolving proactively, learning how to adapt communication approaches to today’s environment, most prefer not to venture into uncharted waters. Instead, they search for “engaged” consumers, delivering messages in standard ways. Media practitioners are following the same course, seeking to define and establish new metrics based on audience engagement.

Marketers are addicted to their belief that deliberate decision making drives both sound marketing programs and consumer choices. They are convinced the appropriate messaging paradigm is to search for consumers rationally engaged in the communication environment and deliver to them rational selling messages on behalf of the brand. With fewer consumers actually occupied in engaged behavior, this deliberate course of action by marketers has essentially become a process of looking for a needle in a haystack.

It’s understandable that marketers would behave in this way. Deliberately plying standard communication tactics with traditional, rational messaging is comfortable. It flows from metrics viewed as important for years: ratings, recall and brand awareness, among others. It attacks attention-paying consumers the marketers know will respond in predictable ways.

Herein lies the crux of the problem. Marketers are adhering to without questioning the most valued principle of advertising: Ads require conscious attention in order to work correctly. And as that is an expectation, metrics like top-of-mind awareness are believed to be solid indicators of advertising efficacy.^{6a}

But in a cluttered world where people pay less and less attention, why does consumption keep going up?

The idea of “instinct” begins to nag, doesn’t it? How can any brand reach increasingly aggressive profit goals from a hard-to-find needle (engaged consumers) with communications approaches that are quickly becoming passe? While marketers continue to focus on the needle of wrestling profits from a shrinking universe of engaged consumers, left on the table is the profit potential of the much larger haystack of disengaged consumers.

DISENGAGEMENT IS A METAPHORICAL HAYSTACK

Rationally, marketers tell themselves that the haystack of disengaged consumers and the

impressions reaching them have little value to communications efforts. Instinct tells us all of those impressions don't lack value.

Consider the size of the pool of impressions delivered to disengaged consumers. The level of disengaged consumers far exceeds that of engaged consumers. Can a universe so large have no value? Instinctively, a population that big would seem to have great potential to provide positive benefit to a brand.

But, are marketers tricking themselves into believing that an engaged consumer is the only one with value? Given that engaged consumers are the ones messages are designed to influence, it would seem so. And there again is that instinctive feeling that something is being left on the table.

Billions of marketing dollars are invested into crafting messages designed for engaged consumers. **Could the ocean of impressions reaching disengaged consumers truly be worth nothing?** Shouldn't resources be devoted to crafting messages that could tap that value? Mathematics would favor that ROI. A small influence on a much larger universe of disengaged consumers could yield vastly better returns than would be required of messages designed to influence a much smaller population of engaged consumers. A far higher percentage of engaged consumers is required to take action for a brand to achieve its business results than is needed to influence disengaged consumers.



So the million dollar question becomes: "Is there any value in the message impressions delivered to disengaged consumers?" In this case, instinct is a shrewd barometer. **There is a profoundly deep impact generated by messages that reach consumers who marketers consider disengaged.** And the impact generated can have a significantly positive impact for brands. But curiously, there is very little understanding on behalf of marketers of what really goes on in the minds of disengaged consumers.

ENGAGEMENT HIDDEN BENEATH DISENGAGEMENT

Fortunately, the human mind's decision-making process is not the murky black box it once was. To debunk an old myth, the mind does not sprout from a left brain-right brain biological paradigm. The mind functions in a much more integrated fashion, with a variety of regions involved in cognitive processes, depending on the specific situation. Sensory inputs stimulate different parts of the brain simultaneously; words stimulate one portion, movements and orientation in space and place others. Neural activity occurs in some number of macro-type neural systems in a synchronized enough fashion that it seems to originate from one place.^{2a}

Anatomically, the neural systems that cumulatively create the brain and its systems are composed of defined areas with roots connected to different periods of evolutionary development. There are a number of systems in the sub-cortical regions, those that are evolutionarily older and responsible for our biological regulation, built-in instincts, emotions and bodily function regulation like breathing, heart function and sleep. On top of that lay the neo-cortical regions (the wrinkled image of a human brain), which are evolutionarily newer and are responsible for capabilities like speech and language.

Rational human thought process seems to be founded on the older brain core regions not just building from those regions, but interacting with them. The neural systems from neo—cortical parts of the brain engage with the older brain regions in the processing of "objects" (images, language, concepts, experiences, feelings, etc.).

Here's another place where the "something left on the table" instinct comes into play. Surprisingly, most of the systems involved in cognition do not engage in the processing of stimuli in an active, conscious way. In other words, there are cognition systems continuously processing stimuli; they just aren't doing it in a consciously engaged way. We are unaware that the system is always "on." Indeed, an overwhelming majority of environmental stimuli are internalized without a person ever being consciously aware of it. Pointedly, the brain is engaged in processing environmental stimuli even when the person is consciously disengaged.

Marketing messages are but one of the many types of environmental stimuli. Could marketers be in error believing that disengaged consumers receive no value from impressions that intersect them when they are not attentive? Most have either never considered, or chosen to ignore, the relentless subconscious stimuli-processing system wired into every human brain.

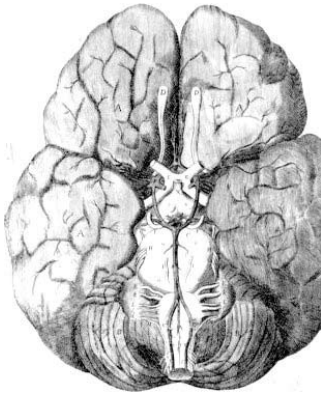
That system exists for a reason. It is intended to ensure survival. It is an internal system geared to avoiding situations, physical states or pain perceived as harmful to a body. Contrarily, it will seek out pleasure and "is probably pre-tuned for achieving these goals in social situations."^{2b}

When thinking about the brain and its cognitive function as a tool to help increase the odds of survival, consider this passage from *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* by Antonio Damasio, the M.W. Van Allen Distinguished Professor and Head of the Department of Neurology at the University of Iowa College of Medicine:

"If ensuring survival of the body proper is what the brain first evolved for, then, when minded brains appeared, they began by minding the body. And to ensure body survival as effectively as possible, nature, I suggest, stumbled on a highly effective solution: representing the outside world in terms of the modification it causes in the body proper, that is, representing the environment by modifying the primordial representation of the body proper whenever an interaction between the organism and the environment takes place."^{2c}

...the brain is engaged in processing environmental stimuli even when the person is consciously disengaged.

Whenever we interact with an environmental stimulus, our brain categorizes it by the associated body modification it elicits. This can be easily described by the flash of motion you see in your peripheral vision that causes you to duck in expectation of something coming in your direction, even though you likely didn't rationally stop to consider the visual stimuli and what it might mean and how you might need to respond. Your unconscious processing system is equipped to handle that for you.



The system doesn't shut down for stimuli like marketing messages. It doesn't necessarily file away all of the copy support points for why a brand might be a rational choice, but the brain does file away logos, packaging shapes and colors, associated images, emotional cues surrounding the message and perhaps sounds and motion. Those perceptions are categorized and tied to survival, pain and pleasure associations stored in long-term memory. Perceptions remain in storage until they are needed to help the decision-making process, consciously or subconsciously.

PLAYING CARDS

Gladwell, Damasio and others all reference a particularly wonderful example of the subconscious, pain/pleasure mechanism in action. In this experiment, subjects were asked to play a game with decks of cards and a budget. The object was to select a card from one of four decks, wagering part of the budget and either winning or losing money based on the outcome of the card drawn. Any card drawn produced either a win or a penalty. What the subjects did not know was that two of the decks were stacked with higher reward/lower penalty cards, and the other two decks with higher penalty/lower reward cards.

A later refinement of the test included the use of a polygraph machine. Polygraph data allowed researchers to read physiological signals indicative of subconscious cognition. Researchers used the test to get a sense of whether or not or how soon subjects could determine the nature of the decks, identifying the draw strategy that would net the highest reward. Surprisingly, results demonstrated that subjects were subconsciously able to identify the high-penalty decks well in advance of conscious realization. Results even showed that subjects demonstrated a physical aversion to "bad" decks early on in the game and even as they reached for the deck.

Damasio suggests that the subconscious process helped to streamline the cognitive process. "Helped by automated sorting-out, the subject would be 'helped into thinking' of the likely goodness or badness of each deck, that is be guided into a theory about the game. Basic body regulatory systems would prepare the ground for conscious, cognitive processing. Without such preparation, the realization of what is good and what is bad would either never arrive, or arrive too late and be too little."^{2d}

Imagine the sniffing consumer, suffering multiple symptoms, walking into the cold remedy aisle of a retail outlet. They seek quick relief in their compromised state, but are faced by a virtual sea of brand options, few of which they may remember. How does that consumer make a decision? Damasio's observations provide an explanation. "A pre-selection is carried out for you, sometimes covertly, sometimes not. A biological mechanism makes the preselection, examines candidates and allows only a few to present themselves for final exam."^{2e}

In *Blink*, Gladwell gives a number of examples, one of which cites the work of psychologist Norman Maier. In one study, he placed subjects in a room where two long ropes hung in a room filled with various tools and implements.^{1b} The ropes were far enough apart so the subjects could not reach them on their own. Each subject was asked to come up with as many ways as possible to tie the two ropes together.



Three of four possible solutions came somewhat easily to participants: stretching one rope, anchoring it and then procuring the other rope; tie an extension link of some other type to one so it would reach the other; and to take one of the lengthier tools in the room to extend the individual's reach to snag the second rope. But try as they might, most subjects couldn't puzzle out the fourth way, swinging one rope like a pendulum and grabbing it while holding the other rope.

but the brain does file away logos, packaging shapes and colors, associated images, emotional cues...

Interestingly, with subjects who could not puzzle it out, researchers would enter the room to speak with them and just happen to brush one of the ropes on their way out to give subjects more time. Those subjects finally had their insightful moment and rationally determined the fourth strategy. The learning is that even while that rational, conscious mind was stumped, the implicit mechanism was still taking in environmental stimuli and categorizing them in the subconscious. Eventually, the pendulum option was sent up the line as a potential solution for the conscious mind to consider.

Quite likely, associations a person's subconscious processing has made over time from environmental stimuli like marketing messages (or color associations like green = natural) are at play under the surface. Images of packages, logos and brands along with other emotional associations are called up from the subconscious as either positive or negative "gut feelings" as the consumer scans the options across the shelves. A few are selected by "gut" and eventually a decision is made.

BEYOND THEORY TO MARKETING EVIDENCE

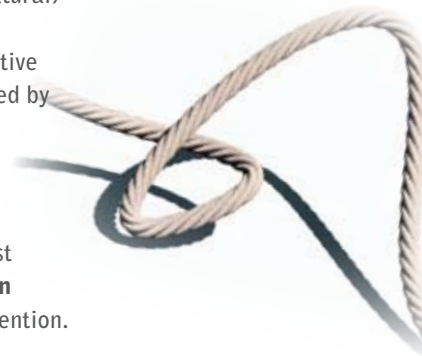
This notion of subconscious attentiveness even when consciously disengaged is not just theory. **Marketers are starting to delve into understanding the mechanics of brain cognition as it relates to advertising.** Many recent results are worthy of deeper attention.

Scientists from the University of California–Los Angeles monitored volunteers connected to MRI machines to view commercials that had just been aired in the Super Bowl. The volunteers had not yet seen any of the ads. Researchers were interested to see if the scans agreed with people's professed claims of which ads were their favorites.

What the scans revealed was that the claimed favorite ads were not the ones that registered the most neural activity among volunteers. For example, the FedEx commercial in which a caveman was crushed by a dinosaur was well liked by respondents. However, scans demonstrated that the ad didn't touch volunteers at an emotional level. The only exception to

this was the point in the ad where the caveman was crushed. At that point, the brain region responsible for processing emotions like fear and threats lit up like a Christmas tree.^{3a}

Similarly, researchers at the Baylor College of Medicine performed the "Pepsi Challenge" with respondents connected to MRI machines. While sampling unlabeled drinks, the same area of the brain lit up when respondents were asked to identify which they preferred.





However, when the test was repeated with one drink labeled “Coke,” new regions of the brain began to light up, especially the regions associated with recall of emotional memories.^{3b} Years of emotional associations linking Coke to notions like “I’d like to teach the world to sing” would be expected to elicit just such a response.

Researchers believe that brain scan data gives insight into non-conscious, emotional preferences. Not that people are trying to be deceptive when asked direct questions, it’s just that people can’t access stimuli associations processed underneath their consciousness. It’s why people have a tough time explaining why they like a Ford over a Chevy. Their preferences aren’t wholly rational or conscious. They’re largely emotional, formed and cemented over time in the sub-cortical part of the brain.^{3c}

In a Canadian study spanning 10 brands, 5 categories and 88 commercials, 5,000 respondents contributed data in pursuit of an advertising awareness model.⁴ Intriguingly, the study offers other supportive evidence on behalf of the value of emotional communication. Specifically, the findings touch on better recall rates for emotional-appeal advertisements.

In the study, data was looked at in different ways, including categorizing commercials on a continuum from Most Thinking to Most Feeling. One expectation the study had was that the Most Thinking brands would exhibit the higher recall scores in concert with long-standing industry research paradigms that suggested this finding to be true. However, the Canadian researchers decided to drop the Thinking vs. Feeling statement because their findings demonstrated a contrary conclusion: Feeling brands recorded higher recall scores than Thinking brands. In fact, the Ten Most Feeling Brands had an average recall score of 21.32%, whereas the Ten Most Thinking Brands had an average recall of 11.2%, almost a two-to-one advantage.

Why would this be? What is it about the nature of emotional brands that would fuel better rates of recall? Given the nature of explicit and implicit learning, here’s one hypothesis: Highly rational messages are promptly engaged by the explicit learning mechanism, which is extremely powerful but highly ephemeral. Strong attention can be paid to those messages for a short period of time, but then they are forgotten. **Emotional messages, on the other hand, are more quickly engaged by implicit memory.** Attentive cognition does not occur, meaning a person would never know they absorbed the message. But that message would tenaciously remain in long-term memory waiting for some trigger or association to evoke it and present it to the conscious mind for consideration.

And maybe that’s what’s happening with the recall rates. **People don’t recall rational messages as well because those messages did not engage a brain mechanism that would allow them to be remembered for a long period of time.** Emotional messages do not suffer this drawback and thereby, are more easily recalled over time, hence the advantageous recall rate.

This conclusion begs the question of why any marketer would want to pour millions of dollars of resources into the research, creation and implementation of rational-based messages that have a high likelihood of serving the brand only for a brief period of time. Might this be part of the reason marketers are instinctively sensing something is being

left on the table? Are valuable resources essentially being placed on a losing bet? Doesn’t Gladwell’s more balanced approach start to make sense?

The Canadian study is not the only one that begins to show the efficacy of emotional associations. A study by researchers at the University of Texas at Dallas, mining more than 2 years of television advertising by a leading telecommunications company, showed more insight in the areas of wearout and optimization.⁵

Across the two-plus years of data, the telecommunications company ran thousands of GRPs featuring ad types from five areas, ranging from highly price/product to highly emotional in nature. Among the many things studied, researchers learned that the more emotional the appeal of specific ads, the less wearout was a factor. **Consumers were much more receptive to emotional appeals, much less likely to tire of specific units quickly over time.**

Further, when researchers worked their findings into an optimization model they created for the brand, they discovered that they could meaningfully increase the volume of brand call hours by significantly shifting creative rotation out of price/product messages to emotional appeal messages. Campaign efficacy increased by 2%.

These findings suggest that the instinct that “something” is being left on the table is correct. In this situation, that “something” is again resources. If price/product creative wears out significantly faster than emotional-based appeals, resources must be invested more often not only to produce new rational messages, but also to replenish the impression pool needed to boost awareness back to prior levels. Over time, that resource level is a significant amount, which could have been left on the table to fund more effective tactics.

In fact, the Ten Most Feeling Brands had an average recall score of 21.32%, whereas the Ten Most Thinking Brands had an average recall of 11.2%, almost a two-to-one advantage.

Further, if the emotional appeal is indeed more effective at increasing consumption, what would the short and long-term value be in shifting more tactics to an emotional appeal? The observation at that point moves from leaving something on the table to ROI that never was able to make it to the table.

HOW BIG IS THE EMOTIONAL APPEAL OPPORTUNITY?

Physiological theory and a few academic research findings, however compelling, may not be convincing enough evidence to prompt a shift in a marketing communications approach. To broaden the argument, let’s look at some marketing case studies that support emotive messaging.

Robert Heath, the eminent British marketing guru, has compiled a noteworthy body of work on the subject of emotional appeal advertising. *The Hidden Power of Advertising*⁶

is a comprehensive analysis of the subject that not only explores the **theory of emotional advertising** appeals, but also cites a wide array of work that provides deeper understanding of key concepts, concluding with several germane case studies of the power of emotional appeals in the marketplace.

Heath shows the magnitude of difference between implicit and explicit learning. (Implicit learning is the cognitive mechanism responsible for internalizing environmental stimuli and forming associations for them at the sub-cortical, unconscious level.) Within his analysis, Heath cites the works of Steven Rose and Lionel Standing, which focused on groups of volunteers participating in memory games.^{6b} One set of games used explicit learning, where pictured items are consciously perceived and stored in the mind and one where respondents simply perceive the image stimuli without having to consciously attempt to remember it.

In these games, the explicit learning test effectively becomes a test of recall, where at best, participants remember maybe 17 or 18 of 20 slides. The second test is basically a recognition test. In that test, respondents could recognize far more images via implicit memory than those recalling via explicit memory; at least 500 times more images. In those tests, Standing stopped at 10,000 images, because there was no decrease in performance by participants even at that point.

Seventeen or 18 of 20 items retained attentively in short-term memory is a significant capability. But that number is dwarfed by what can be retained, categorized and considered unconsciously by implicit learning. **It's literally almost a 500-to-1 advantage for our unconscious, yet attentive minds.**

Therein lies perhaps the most fundamental violation of Gladwell's balance between deliberate and instinctive decision making on behalf of marketers. While the rational decision-making capability of consumers represents a mere 1/500 sliver of cumulative attentive ability, marketers devote nearly all of their marketing resources toward that sliver.

Think about it. Marketers have a predisposition to employ hard sell, rational decision-making creative. When emotional messages are featured, marketers still want to make sure those messages dutifully cover every reason why for their brand. Media orientation tends to favor either rational commodity considerations or, when qualitative factors are considered, consumers who are consciously attentive to their message environment. Engagement is the current hot media topic.

...respondents reached at the unconscious level had better favorability toward the advertised brands than those who claimed they had seen ads and those not exposed.

Predisposition to the rational sliver goes beyond issues of implementation. For example, testing focuses on measures of conscious consideration. It is rare to hear a case of a client going with an approach that their gut says is right, but the test scores say are bad.

The big implication here is that if Gladwell's balance is to be honored in communication efforts, marketers need to equalize allocation of resources between the rational and emotional appeal. A logical question would be to understand whether or not there is really an upside to reallocating resources from the rational to the emotional. **The good news is that this notion is not a gamble, according to Heath.**

RECOGNITION AS A KEY METRIC

Researchers in the United Kingdom tried to get a sense of the impact of unconscious attention by using a unique twist in assessing results.^{7a} In addition to considering claimed advertising awareness as the benchmark for efficacy, researchers went further and asked respondents questions that assessed overall recognition of the campaigns. Two interesting findings occurred:

First, there was indeed a much deeper, real exposure to the campaigns than was indicated by claimed advertising awareness alone. In both campaigns, almost half of all respondents claimed not to have seen the ads on television, but in fact recognized campaign executions. Further, 66% to 75% of all respondents who recognized campaign ads claimed they had not seen them on television. This is hard evidence of the unconscious mechanism at work.

Remember, when research asks questions like "Do you remember seeing an ad for brand X?", the question is prompting the explicit learning mechanism that is extremely shrewd in problem solving, but can only hold limited amounts of information in memory for a short time. When asking recognition-based questions, the research will be prompting the subconscious, implicit learning mechanism, which can recall stored associations for conscious attention.

The studies also demonstrated that **respondents reached at the unconscious level had better favorability toward the advertised brands than those who claimed they had seen ads and those not exposed.** What this suggests is that emotional associations being communicated unconsciously to consumers in the spots are indeed having a positive effect. Like the consumer in the cold remedy aisle or one of Maier's subjects trying to determine a fourth solution, when presented questions relating to favorability, consumers were using unconsciously delivered emotional associations to generate a positive favorability assessment even though they consciously, rationally were not able to make that type of assessment.

The study showed timing also had an impact on recognition and favorability. The studies suggest that both areas take some time to manifest their efficacy.^{7b} While ad awareness will quickly become evident with the airing of impressions, recognition and favorability will lag. Further, while a decrease in ad impressions will have correspondingly detrimental effects on ad awareness, it has the opposite effect on recognition and favorability. That is not to suggest that recognition and favorability will increase with fewer impressions, but what appears to happen is that impact levels can be sustained without a massive re-infusion of media weight. Modest sustaining weight in itself does the trick.

This type of situation presents a problem for marketers in search of immediate ROI. If metrics like ad awareness become a barometer of campaign success, and when they

start dropping as initial campaign pushes is slowed, the marketer may come to an erroneous conclusion that a campaign is losing steam, when, in fact, it is just ready to start paying dividends.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETERS

1. The true nature of the communication process redefines ROI for marketers.

Marketers must realize that significant momentum is being inexorably built behind the veil of what they traditionally monitor. As impressions are delivered to consumers, implicit learning is taking place, emotional associations are being created for the brand and favorability is likely increasing. Marketers need to understand that communications efforts may just be reaching the point of increasing returns rather than diminishing returns and appropriately work to unleash their potential.

Daniel Schacter, Professor and Chair of Psychology at Harvard University, has theorized that **memories are stored across the breadth of the brain and that they are linked together by networks of connections called “engrams.”** Heath believes that a brand’s engram would connect not only with the engram of its own advertising, but with those of other brands, other advertising, and likely emotional associations the brand evokes within individuals. The engram would ultimately create a very large network of connections relevant to the brand across the entire brain.^{6c}

These networks are linked by electrical connections called pathways. As advertising delivers messages via impressions, every time the content of that message stimulates one of those electrical paths, that particular route becomes more engrained, just like a path through a field. The more the path is used, the better defined it becomes and the more likely it will be to be used in the future.^{6d} All of which is most likely to occur via implicit memory, without the consumer being conscious it is happening.

When those memory associations have been created, essentially all that is needed to set them in motion is some type of trigger. Damasio cites one interesting example: One of his patients had such an extreme form of amnesia that he could not hold onto information learned explicitly, consciously, for more than a few minutes. Someone could have a perfectly normal conversation with him, come back later, and the patient wouldn’t remember the conversation or having met the person before.

However, when a manual skill was learned, such as holding a stylus in contact with a small dot on a gyrating plate, the more the task was performed, the better this patient became at consistently being able to hold the stylus to the dot on the plate. The interesting thing is that even though the example patient could not remember things like conversations from an hour earlier in the day or having taken the stylus test, the patient performed wonderfully on the dot test; even two years after it was first administered. This demonstrates evidence of memory paths being created, used again and again, then laying in wait for a trigger.

2. The medium determines whether to take an emotional or rational creative approach.

One might argue marketers should reallocate marketing budgets to take advantage of the

power of emotive advertising. **Reallocation of resources may be taking the point a bit too far.** However, what does seem to be relevant is additional consideration to contact planning and the kind of messages delivered at those contact points.

Marketing teams do a fairly potent job of identifying the appropriate and most powerful contact points for reaching consumers. What the dynamic of implicit learning does is suggest a new orientation in considering those contact points. Step one continues to be a comprehensive audit of contact points, while step two becomes determining what type of learning (or attention) is occurring at that particular contact point.

For example, does this contact point simply feed implicit learning, creating or deepening emotional associations in long-term memory? Or is the contact point one that intersects the consumer in proximity to some type of trigger?

**...memories are stored across the breadth of the brain
...they are linked together by networks of
connections called “engrams.”**

Media efforts must ensure that contact plans are executed to appropriately position brand messages. There should never be a transaction simply to procure impressions. Placement should be negotiated to facilitate the communication environment present at the contact point understanding the consumer’s attention state at the moment of that contact point.

For example, television is a high-reach, but low-involvement medium. Television viewers in general demonstrate much less active brain wave patterns than with other media types. Over time, viewers have learned that there is no way to determine how much value any particular message will have. Sensing that they are not in control of the marketing message experience, viewers have evolved to take control in the only way they can: by conditioning themselves to pay less, or no, conscious attention to messages.

What that means is that television has evolved into a medium where the majority of attention and the majority of learning takes place implicitly, below the conscious level. Further, brain wave research demonstrates that activity decreases with subsequent exposures. This doesn’t mean that added exposures are less valuable, it simply means that subsequent exposures more easily reinforce previously learned information, strengthening neural pathways created with the initial messages.

This has a few implications for contact plans. First of all, television should be considered less relevant as a bastion of rational, hard-sell messaging. It should be considered a juggernaut delivery tool for emotional brand associations. Secondly, the notion of engagement does not have relevance for television unless the nature of the message delivered requires rational, conscious viewer attention. Finally, if subsequent impressions are valuable, but essentially in cementing brand associations created early on with campaigns, marketers should more seriously consider the use of smaller units like :10s and :15s. Why invest behind deeper copy when the deeper copy has already done its job?

Consider conducting this type of assessment for each medium in the contact plan. For magazines and newspapers, consumers are much more engaged, paying high levels of attention to the medium. Immersion in these media requires conscious engagement of verbal and motor regions of the brain to physically complete the task at hand. And it's likely that readers are actively interested in the subject matter they are considering. Otherwise they would not have invested the resources of money and time to purchase and read the medium.

Consequently, contact plans should consider print to create or take advantage of a trigger, whether it is used to advance the consumer down the purchase process or to initiate an immediate call-to-action. The strength of newspaper, in particular, to generate sales for local marketers would bear out this rationale.

The internet presents a mixed bag. Banner ads and pop-ups seem to have the same message demeanor as do television ads. As the internet has matured, the novelty of clicking on a banner ad has long worn out and consumers have simply conditioned themselves to consciously ignore the ads. But like television, consumers cannot turn off implicit learning, so meaningful impressions are generated even by banner ads.

On the other hand, when consumers are immersed in searches, the web becomes very much like magazines and newspapers. Marketing messages tend to be much more relevant to the content at hand and users are highly engaged in their environment. With attention levels high, rational messages designed to initiate some kind of trigger make tremendous sense.

Creative approach also comes into play. If the contact point largely fuels implicit learning, there is less need for copy and logic. Neither of those neural systems will be engaged when the message is delivered. Instead, implicit learning contact points require will generate much more impact by using imagery and emotion. On the other hand, at explicit learning contact points, copy, detail, rationale and call-to-action are important.

The creative development briefing process is also affected. Account planners and account management must be sensitive to including background and direction to the creative team that facilitates understanding of the nuances in messaging needed for implicit versus explicit communication elements. If the creative team is not given the insight needed to engineer the message appropriately, it is unlikely that they will.

3. Is measurement destined to be “precisely wrong”?

There's an old adage: “If you give a man a hammer, he'll try to fix everything with the hammer.” Marketers have behaved the same way with rational communication approaches. Nearly the entire communication industry is geared to the creation, placement, delivery and measurement of rational marketing messages. And just as marketers deliver rational messages using a hammer to consumers, so too do they also measure impact with the same hammer.

Performance metrics are overwhelmingly geared to understand conscious, deliberate consumer response to messages. The most common performance currency is awareness. Think about it. One of the first things researchers do is to directly ask consumers “Are you

aware of Brand X advertising” as a measure of campaign efficacy. If in the cumulative exposure of Brand X messages to consumers, conscious awareness only represents a fraction of the impact the campaign has had on consumers, researchers are getting an excellent feel for a fraction of real consumer impact.

In addition, it is fairly common that **the techniques used to procure results tend to speak most directly to the explicit, conscious learning system.** Once again, if the majority of a campaign's impact registers in the implicit learning system, using techniques that do not assess that system continues a legacy that gives marketers no prayer of revealing the true impact of a campaign. Heath cites John Banham, past head of the Confederation of British Industry, cutting to the heart of the matter:

“We are in danger of valuing most highly those things we can measure most accurately, which means we are often precisely wrong rather than approximately right.”^{6e}

Heath believes that recognition is the key metric. Why? Recognition is well-equipped to give some insight to the health of the brand associations that exist at a subconscious level. Adds Heath: “...most consumers make brand decisions based not upon reason and logic, but upon intuition guided by ‘markers’ derived from past experience... many if not all brand decisions will be made in this way, guided semi consciously or even subconsciously by brand associations which have often never been consciously interpreted for any further meaning.”^{6f}

Just as marketers must direct effort at changing the orientation of contact planning and message creation from rational and deliberate to emotional, so too must assessment orientation change. Getting the tools and metrics right is just one part of the research equation. Additionally, marketers must change their mindset to different goals and expectations. Old paradigms like brand awareness must be rethought in favor of learning more about the parameters of recognition.

WHY SHOULD MARKETERS PAY ATTENTION NOW?

What really is the relevance of understanding and reacting to what Heath calls “the hidden power of advertising”? Marketers have in the past six or seven decades perfected a communication science that they believe is the key to brand success in the marketplace. Until the past ten or fifteen years, much of what has gone into marketing paradigms has been extremely effective.

But now, the explosion of technology provides consumers with unprecedented levels of choice, and traditional media stalwarts have become so fractionalized that they can no longer be called “mass.” This condition has completely shifted control of the marketing communication process to consumers from the seller. Twenty years ago, marketers operated under caveat emptor and could attack consumers almost at will wherever and whenever they wished. Today, **the world operates on caveat venditor.** The seller must beware, because consumers control media choice and can eliminate or avoid marketing messages virtually at will.



That does not bode well for messages and delivery systems impeccably crafted to deliver a rational, hard-sell message. To be sure, there are still many opportunities to find and convince consumers to buy with a product/price message. But those opportunities aren't large enough to meet increasing investor demand for higher profitability.

Marketers should pay attention to Heath's hidden power, because the implicit learning mechanism in the mind of each consumer provides a potent silver lining to address the situation. In a marketplace where consumers can dictate choice, the leveraging of implicit learning shifts control back to the marketer. **Implicit learning is always on during waking hours. It continues to absorb environmental stimuli and categorize them without the consumer being able to do a thing about it.** The marketer can dictate the nature of the message for any impression the marketer chooses to deliver.

All that it would take for marketers **to fully exploit the opportunity** is to dive into this uncharted territory with the same gusto with which they have plied their trade for years. Strategically, this new course makes tremendous sense. Not only does it open up the door for better effectiveness of communication efforts, it likely will not be embraced by many competitors. This new course of action, likely eschewed by competitors, can **generate superior marketplace results for clients and create a noteworthy first-mover advantage for marketers** courageous enough to act on the obvious.

None of this learning has been an epiphany to advertisers in the U.K. Heath cites a number of cases of blue chip brands that have specifically reoriented their approach to take advantage of implicit learning in engineering their communication efforts. Marketers that have done so have reaped significant benefits because of their efforts. Success has bred competition as more marketers move in an emotive direction.

Here in the United States, it is time for a change. Our instincts as marketers have told us for some time now that something is amiss. We are leaving something on the table: opportunity. It is not only opportunity to ratchet up marketing efforts to meet ever more difficult goals, but the opportunity to more effectively and enduringly bond client brands to the consumers they serve. As marketing professionals serving our clients, we can do no less.

NOTES

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