

Research needs to measure emotions to effect real change

Annett Pecher, Emotional Logic, says market research needs to work harder in measuring consumer behavioural aspects that are hard to quantify

THE TRADITIONAL model of consumer behaviour does not work. There is evidence that the current model marketers are operating from has fundamental shortcomings that dramatically impact on the effectiveness of campaigns.

Many brand owners experience situations where their tracking studies indicate one thing and sales figures or qualitative data are contradicting the results. Campaigns based on 'solid research evidence' fail to deliver, while campaigns that did badly in pre-testing are successful. So, what is happening?

The current model that underlies the development of brand communication is based on a number of accepted beliefs, such as: 'consumers have to pay attention to advertising for it to work', or 'information has to be processed consciously in order to be stored in memory' and 'consumers apply logical, rational reason when choosing brands'. It is also assumed that advertising has to have a single, clear message in order to have impact. But where have those beliefs come from and are they leading to success? Or would the industry benefit from looking for a new, different set of beliefs—a new model—to derive more effective communication solutions?

Academic and commercial research is delivering new insights into consumer behaviour by stepping outside of what is currently 'common practice', and the results are very interesting.

Change of behaviour

Many areas of research accept that lasting and fundamental change in behaviour requires a change on the unconscious level within the individual and in emotional structures. Yet, marketing theory focuses on rational decision-making and conscious processes. The objective of marketing activity is a change in consumer behaviour to switch to a new brand, consume more of a certain product, or act on a cause. These changes will require an internal change within the individual and are likely to be strongly influenced by emotion and unconscious processes. That is where we should look for information and measure success.

Research (1) has proven that consumers exposed to advertising while distracted with other tasks can still form a positive bias towards a brand, which will influence their purchase decision-making. This appears to be particularly powerful for low-involvement product categories. Many of the current advertising testing methods involve subjects paying attention and measuring 'involvement' of the ad, which may not be as important as we all think. It also raises the question as to how effective tracking studies are that measure awareness and conscious recall. So are we tracking the wrong things? This may be one reason for the relatively weak link between recall and sales that many brands experience.

On the other hand, it opens the door to another type of market research – one intent on discovering how information is coded, stored and recalled from the

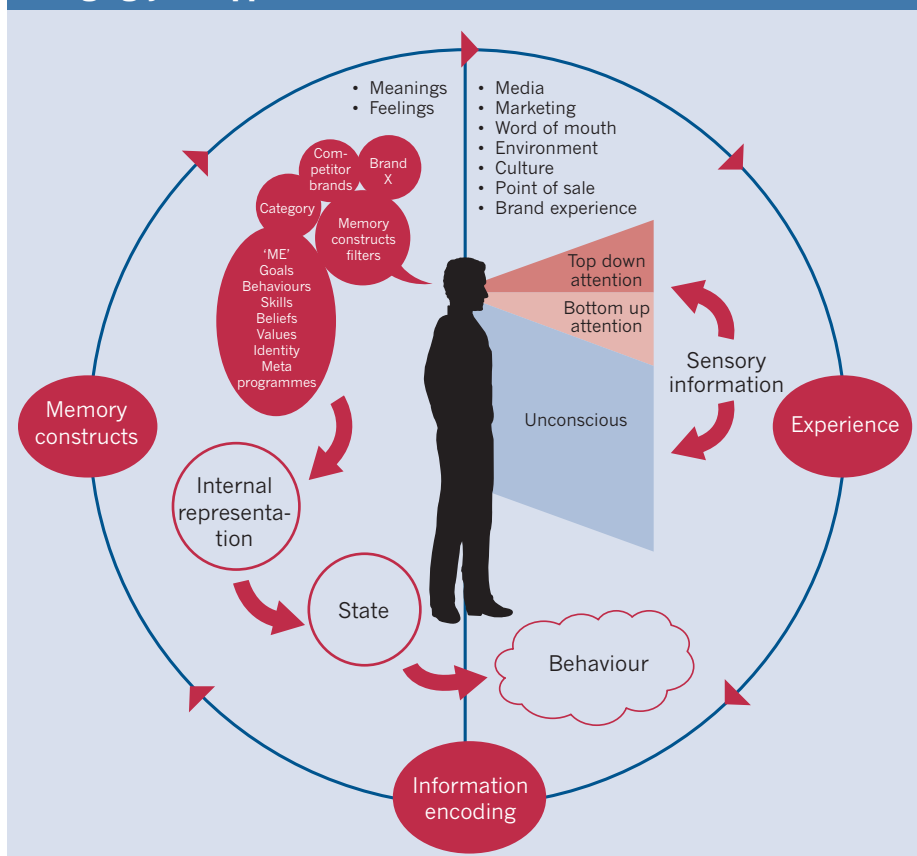
unconscious mind – an area brands have to understand more about if they are to take advantage of this element of consumer influence.

For people to act, they need an impetus – and that is emotion. Many of us perceive ourselves as 'above emotion' – as purely rational, objective beings. That is not the case; we all experience emotion all of the time. However, a lot of this is below the level of awareness. And so we think we have made a rational, objective decision based on weighing up criteria, while we actually reacted to an emotion. Research (2) has shown that, without access to their emotions, consumers cannot make 'rational' decisions. Emotions are the drivers of our lives, whether we are aware of it or not.

So, if emotion is what drives people, then brands should surely try to make them feel powerful emotions – shock

FIGURE 1

Changing your approach



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them, overwhelm them. Yet, familiarity may actually be the most powerful emotion you can create in a consumer. As human beings we gravitate towards what we know. In increasingly complex lives we need our habits and routines to get through the day. We prefer to socialise with people who are 'like us'. Research (3) has shown that familiarity leads to an increased likelihood that the product will stand out and can also lead to a bias and a preference for one brand over another. This represents yet another challenge for brands – how do you feel familiar and stand out from the competition at the same time? A lot of it has to do with connecting your brand to emotional drivers using a language and visual style unique to your brand. This makes it critical to identify existing emotional drivers and powerful stories within the consumer's consciousness.

Attitudes as indicators

The standard marketing approach is to measure attitudes, then change those attitudes to something we believe will lead to sales. But what happens to the sales? Do they always follow the attitudes? From personal experience we all know that we can have positive attitudes towards something but still not act. Dijksterhuis et al (4) shows that attitudes can be easily influenced by the environment and that some actions take place automatically. So the attitudes we are measuring may be very different from the attitudes people adopt when shopping. Ehrenberg (5) showed that it is also possible for people to buy something/act on something without having changed their attitude.

Most market research measures 'noise'. Not intentionally and not knowingly of course, but a lot of what is being measured with traditional market research is 'noise'. This is due to a variety of factors. First, many research techniques rely on consumers' memory. However, memory is a very unreliable source. We now know (6) that every time we access a memory, we actually change what is being stored and what is accessible to us, as memories depend on our current state. This means, if we remember something when we are feel-

ing happy, we may remember different details than when we are sad. So the way people are feeling when the research is conducted influences what information we will get. The second factor is that many consumers are not very aware of their emotions. They will act on their emotions and then have to rationalise their decision in order to 'make sense'. In research they will then tell you 'objectively' about their rational reasons for doing what they do. It's actually a lot of noise covering up for the fact that they have no idea why they really did it. Finally, the fact we are conducting research itself leads to opinions being passed that would not have occurred otherwise; the unrealistic settings and pre-framed questioning techniques create results that simply do not occur in real life. Some of the information obtained in this way may well hint at what is happening, but is it the whole picture? Unlikely.

Several studies by Dijksterhuis et al (7) found that, in complex choice situations, consumers who think unconsciously tend to make better decisions, that is decisions more closely matching their criteria and with a higher post-purchase satisfaction. It is believed that the reason for this is that the conscious mind has limited capacity – we can only hold a few (7 plus or minus 2) things consciously at any one time, while the unconscious mind has no such limit. It can cope with a large number of items being compared on a large number of factors and will easily identify the best choice for the consumer. Interestingly, this may be in conflict with how consumers approach complex decisions such as a car or house purchase, where most will deliberate factors consciously or make lists of pros and cons etc. Or is it? Maybe again it is the emotions we act on, and the list making is noise or post-rationalisation?

Implications for market research

If market research is to support the development of more effective marketing solutions and wants to enable measurement of factors that actually do indicate sales growth or brand equity, we have to delve into the realms of emotion and unconscious thought processes. This means new market research techniques

have to evolve to fulfil those new requirements.

Researchers also have to get closer to real-life processes and become aware of their influence on the results, and do everything in their power to minimise research impact. And if you find yourself thinking 'we are already doing that' take another look – most research studies out there still prime consumers to come up with certain answers to confirm an underlying hypothesis, rather than truly identifying what is going on.

Finally, from a brand owner point of view, we have to stop measuring things for the sake of it. Yes there are some variables that can easily be measured – so many businesses do – but ask yourself, do those measures help your decision making? If a measure is a poor indicator of sales growth, should you really base your decisions on it? Would it not be more sensible to find a measure that does relate to sales – even if it is a bit harder to quantify? How many of your business's key performance indicators and key brand indicators are actually true to their titles?

In order to fully understand and influence consumer behaviour, brands will have to pay more attention to low involvement, unconscious and emotional aspects of consumer behaviour, and integrate this knowledge with the well researched rational reasons and stated attitudes to get the complete picture. ■

1. For example, Grimes and Kitchen: *Researching mere exposure effects to advertising*. *International Journal of Market Research*, Vol. 49 Issue 2, 2007.
2. See the case of a patient treated by Dr Damasio of the University of Southern California, who had lost some brain tissue due to a tumour. www.usc.edu/uscnews
3. Janiszewski: *Pre-attentive mere exposure effects*. *Journal of Consumer Research* 20, 1993.
4. Dijksterhuis et al: *The unconscious consumer*. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 15, 2005.
5. Ehrenberg: *Repetitive advertising and the consumer*. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 14, 1974.
6. *The Economist: Survey of the Brain*. December 2006.
7. Dijksterhuis et al: *The deliberation without attention effect*, *Science*, 311, 1005, 2006.