

Research beyond reason: filter maps and emotional connections

Annett Pecher, Emotional Logic, shows how specialist qualitative research can help us unearth and understand emotional drivers in the consumer's mind

HAVE YOU EVER been to see a movie with someone and you absolutely loved it, while they were seriously underwhelmed? It proves that two people can be exposed to the same external event but have a very different experience. It also proves the need for targeting in brand and marketing communication. But how does this process actually work – and can understanding it help us develop more effective brand and marketing communication?

Emotional Logic specialises in understanding the process in consumers' minds and develops tailor-made research methodologies that apply this knowledge within a specific marketplace. The two key players within the consumer decision-making process are logic on one hand and emotions on the other. Both of those elements have to work together for people to be able to make a choice.

Neuroscientist Dr Damasio of the University of Southern California has demonstrated this through many cases, in particular one where a patient appeared to have lost his ability to make decisions.

This was initially thought to have been caused by damage to the individual's reasoning powers but was actually due to loss of access to his emotions.

Communication filters

Let us first have a look at how the process works. Figure 1 shows the communication model in a simplistic format. A person is exposed to an external event. Maybe they are entering a crowded room where a cocktail party is in full swing. There will be noises, sights, smells and maybe changes in temperature that the individual is exposed to when entering the room. This is a huge amount of information to process; and therefore a set of filters is applied to filter out 'unimportant' information. Those filters are made up of memories, values, beliefs, decisions and attitudes, and will distort, delete and generalise the sensory information to a smaller, more manageable amount.

This reduced amount of information makes up the internal representation of the external event – it is what the individual internalises from the information available – this may include feelings, seeing images in their mind, hearing noises or saying something to themselves (like 'gosh, it's hot in here').

This is an important point: every single individual will have a different internal representation of the same event. We do not experience what is really there – we experience what our filters allow us to experience. This ultimately means we co-create everything. It also explains why two people can have very different memories of the same event.

This internalised information is then processed – partly on a conscious and partly on an unconscious level – and leads to the individual entering a certain state or physiology, which then leads to a certain behaviour (or decision).

So, individuals who see themselves as people who love parties, and whose perception is that all people are at the party to have fun, may go into their 'party-animal state', become very excited and start entertaining people. While someone who has decided they are 'in a bad mood' and believes all the people at the party are just here to impress each other and be pretentious may look for a quiet corner to down some drinks and look for a familiar face to talk to.

'Developing a brand proposition or campaign message without knowledge of the filter map is like driving in unknown territory without a road map'

So why is that important? Because there is a danger of treating the consumer as a 'blank canvas', while actually they are not. Unless we identify the filters a consumer has in their mind, how can we possibly know what consumers will take from a certain piece of communication? How can we influence them if we don't even understand how they process information?

Filter maps

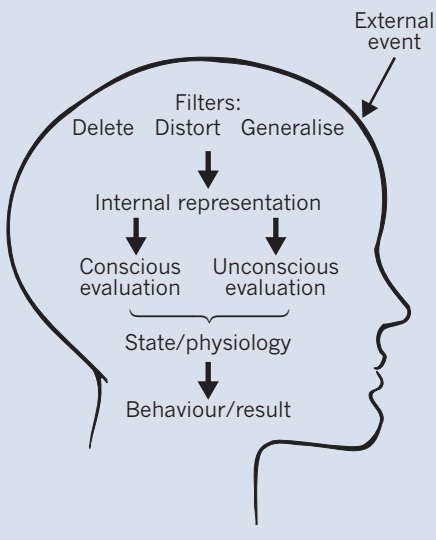
The filter map is a simplification of reality, as is any model, but it can help us understand better how consumers process information and therefore predict how they may react to it. A filter map is a network of the constructs – thoughts and feelings – a person holds in relation to a certain subject area or category, and that influence how the person sees the world and how they will respond in a given situation.

People have filter maps for pizza, for childcare, for beer, for renting a flat, and so on. When exposed to an external event (for example, 'let's order a pizza'), those constructs will be activated and one leads to another. Maps can overlap – so the thoughts about pizza soon turn into thoughts about beer or wine, and so on. There can also be contradictions within those maps – part of me wants the indulgence of a pizza, but another part is on a diet.

Now, let us say the external event is a TV ad for a takeaway pizza brand. Again, the filter map 'pizza' will be activated, along with a filter map for 'TV advertising' and, depending on what the consumer has

FIGURE 1

Communication model





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stored on those maps, what they take away from the ad will differ significantly.

So, in order to develop effective communication, we first need to identify what the consumer already 'knows' – what is stored on their filter maps. And that can be identified through research.

How we get the information

There are two key elements that affect how we collect the information. First, up to 95% of thought processes are unconscious. Most of the filter maps are held within the unconscious mind; and their activation happens extremely fast and without the individual being consciously aware of it. This represents a difficulty for research – how can we find out about something the individual is not even aware of? The second element is the fact that the unconscious mind does not think in words – it is the domain of images, sensory information and feelings.

So, how do we obtain this information? We get the data through in-depth one-on-one interviews. A common, overall, generalisable filter map will emerge after only 15–30 interviews (depending on sample structure and subject area), and will reliably allow a prediction of behaviour. At that point, all the core constructs are discovered and additional interviews do not add new information. This may seem like a small sample size. However, we have to consider that 15 interviews generate 22.5 hours of qualitative data (the equivalent of 15 focus groups).

Also, this mode of data collection allows consumers to 'tell their story' and make free and natural connections, as the interviews are unstructured. This is why this type of research generates very rich qualitative data that uncovers hidden depths in large quantities.

We use questioning techniques developed based on NLP (neurolinguistic programming) values elicitation, and also storytelling. This is required in order to reach the unconscious mind. We also use images and drawing to gain even deeper insights. It is amazing how much more information can be obtained from the same individual using those advanced research techniques, which make it

possible for respondents to be able and willing to share this information.

The output of the research can be summarised in the shape of a filter map. This map will show all commonly shared concepts and the relationships between them. Let us have a look at an example.

The pizza map

We have recently completed a sample study on pizza. The overall filter map for pizza can be found in Figure 2. In real life the map is interactive (1) – you can click on any circle or any line to see the meaning behind every circle (a construct) and every line (how constructs are linked). An example can be seen in Figure 3.

Some key themes illustrate the richness of the data.

1. A very strong central theme for pizza lies around 'belonging', 'sharing' and 'fun'. Very early in the interview participants

shared memories of childhood, nights in with friends or partners, and house parties. To many of them pizza was a key activating part of those constructs. This combination of constructs is also linked to alcohol consumption – and it is through this that pizza and beer/wine are linked.

2. 'Taste', 'indulgence' and 'regret' is another theme that was very prevalent. Many participants felt compelled to 'eat a whole one', even though they knew it would lead to physical discomfort and 'regret' – but it was seen as a treat or 'indulgence' and well worth the pain. I think we have all been there.

Interestingly, there is also a link from the 'indulgence' (overeating) directly into relaxation – with many participants feeling that after eating a whole pizza all they were capable of doing was 'sprawl out on the sofa', forcing themselves to relax.

FIGURE 2

Filter map for pizza

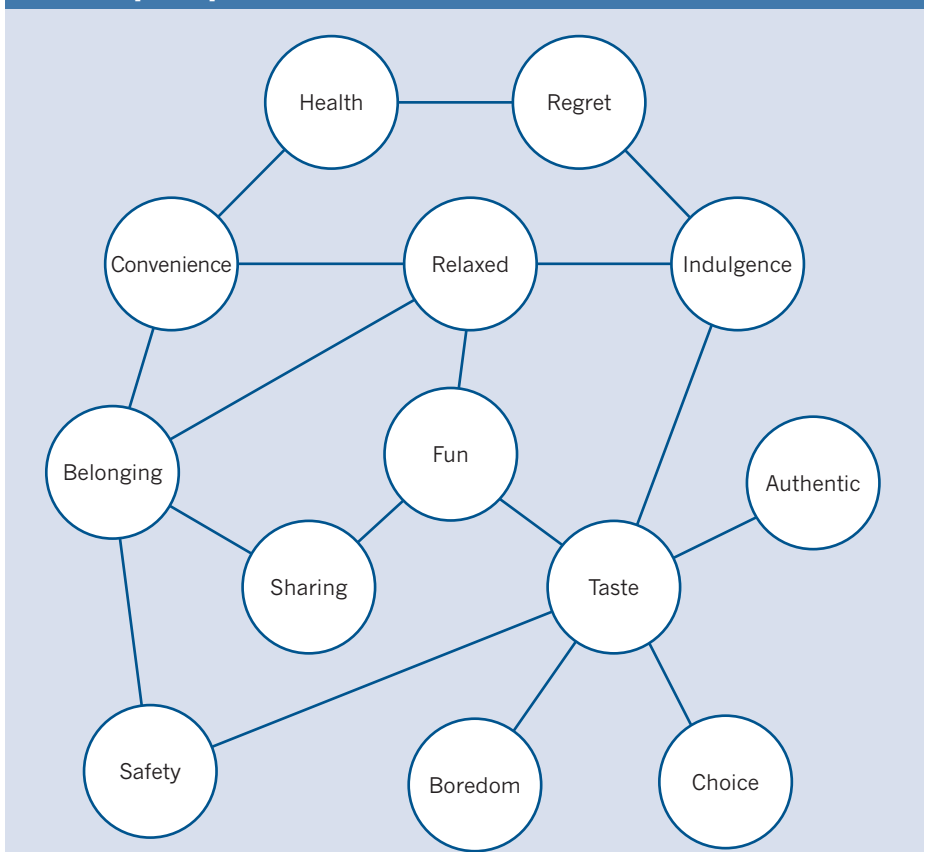
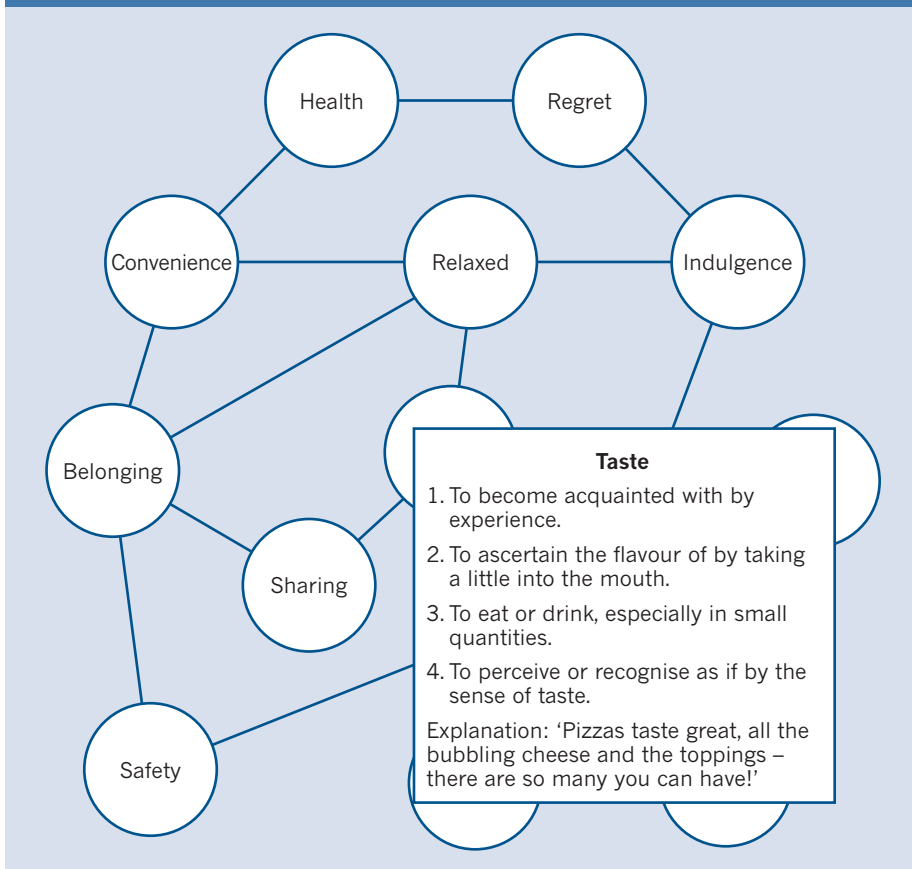


FIGURE 3

Filter map for pizza – interactive example



3. Without a doubt pizza is a convenience food, and convenience leads to a number of other constructs. As a convenience food, pizza is automatically classed as unhealthy, and participants had very strong feelings about this element, with one showing a picture of a pipe blocked with lard as an illustration of her arteries, and another saying 'I know I am doing something very bad to myself.' However, as pizza was seen as an occasional 'treat', the perception was that this 'badness' could be counteracted by a few days of healthy eating after the event.

Convenience also enables relaxation: by eliminating the hassle of cooking, it contributes to the construct of belonging, as it enables people to be with friends and family, rather than by themselves in the kitchen preparing food.

These are just a few examples and there is much more rich data available, but the key question is: what does this tell us that other research doesn't?

The right connections

For a start, it clearly shows the connections between constructs. As human beings, we know our minds function by constantly hopping from thought to thought. A thought stirs up a certain feeling, which leads to another thought,

and so on. It is valuable to know how those connections work, so that our communication does not accidentally fire up negative concepts.

For example, 'indulgence' is directly linked to 'regret'; and 'convenience' is linked to concerns about health. A brand positioning focusing strongly on 'indulgence' and 'convenience' has therefore the potential to elicit negative emotions. A positioning based on 'fun', 'sharing' and 'relaxation', on the other hand, is much less likely to elicit negative feelings.

What is interesting is how similar the filter map of pizza is to that of alcohol. The concepts of 'sharing', 'fun' and 'relaxation' are cornerstones of both and are strong feel-good elements. Both pizza and alcohol have addictive tendencies for many people, because they elicit those strong positive feelings. Both also achieve a 'numbing' effect, which leads to relaxation. As a brand positioning, a focus on 'sharing', 'fun' and 'relaxation' will elicit stronger positive feelings than 'taste' for example. In fact 'taste' was overall a relatively weak concept, with both positive and negative associations, none of which really fulfilled core human needs; while the 'sharing', 'fun' and 'relaxation', on the other hand, are closely linked with the core human need of 'belonging'.

So, as it is the strongest positioning, we may find 'sharing', 'fun' and 'relaxation' is being applied by many brands in the market.

This means there are two options – maybe we can develop a campaign that does this better, stronger and more single-mindedly than any other brands. Or we should look at developing a different proposition. I personally find 'authentic' an option. There are some brands in the pizza market that display authentic undertones – but no-one has gone all out for it, not as a brand positioning. 'Authenticity' as a general concept has links with craftsmanship and ultimately leads us to our roots and heritage.

Now, there is another strong positioning. When it comes to food today consumers love the traditional – anything from fruit cordial to meat is going back to 'old ways' – partly for health reasons (fewer additives), partly for taste reasons, and partly because we love to support people who care about what they produce. This opens up a whole new world of concepts that could be added to the pizza, filter map – extending the market beyond its existing boundaries.

The other interesting element discovered by this research is the negative emotions attached to pizza. The 'health' concerns are well known and expected. However, there is also an element of 'boredom' related to the taste of pizza which is interesting. And pizza is also used to eliminate the fear of 'rejection' – it is a safe choice both for me and for people I am entertaining.

Summary

Filter maps show the constructs that are activated in a consumer's mind when involved in a certain subject area or category.

For brand development and marketing it is important to know the filter maps of your audience in order to estimate what they will take out from marketing communications and to predict their subsequent behaviour.

Only if a brand activates the right constructs and elicits the right feelings will a positive reaction occur.

Developing a brand proposition or campaign message without knowledge of the filter map is like driving in unknown territory without a road map – unsure of all your options and unable to choose the fastest, most efficient route. ■

1. See <http://www.emotional-logic.co.uk/?p=118>

