

must buy product now:

HOW NEUROMARKETING TAPS IN TO YOUR MIND

by Eric Butterman

■ People are fascinated by the field of advertising. Witness the TV show *Mad Men*, the stylized and provocative AMC 1960s drama which follows the lives of Madison Avenue advertising executives. Don Draper, the slick lead character, talks about “the real” reasons people buy a product—not for the function but for how it makes us feel.

“Advertising is based on one thing: happiness,” he says. “And do you know what happiness is? Happiness is the smell of a new car. It’s freedom from fear. It’s a billboard on the side of a road that screams with reassurance that whatever you’re doing is okay. You are okay.”

Don Draper would have loved neuromarketing.

“It’s combining brain science and marketing for the sake of selling,” says Roger Dooley, a marketing consultant and a blogger for neurosciencemarketing.com.

Can a brain scan really tell companies what products a person likes? “It’s fascinating to see what piques a person’s interest,” Dooley says. “Sometimes they don’t even know how much they’re really responding. But the [brain scan] readings can give you an idea right away of whether they were won over by the product.”

The brain measurement is most commonly done through electroencephalography (EEG) or functional MRI (fMRI). EEG keeps track of brain waves via electrodes attached to the head which show readings based on currents. It is possible to see whether testees are paying attention, whether the stimulus leaves them indifferent, if it triggers positive or negative emotions, and a whole other array of reactions. Functional MRI assesses brain activity through oxygen levels as they relate to magnetic fields. (Dooley prefers fMRI for accuracy, but some scanners can cost \$4 million. EEG is cheaper and still fairly reliable.)

Neuromarketing didn’t begin with brain scans but with the idea of what the scans are looking for, says Christophe Morin, co-author of *Neuromarketing: Understanding the Buy Buttons in Your*

Customer’s Brain (Thomas Nelson, 2007). For Morin, this is a natural offshoot of communicative effectiveness—with people like Bert Decker, author of the self-published *Creating Messages That Motivate*, among the pioneers.

Dooley says universities and other research arenas are slow to respect the field of neuromarketing, and that there’s a general lack of data. He notes a study published in June’s *Journal of Neuroscience* related to fMRI brain scans. Conducted at UCLA, the study’s results show that the medial prefrontal cortex of the brain can be affected by messages, in this case resulting in sunscreen being used through exposure to a public service announcement. Said the study’s senior author Matthew Lieberman on ScienceDaily.com: “From this region of the brain, we can predict for about three-quarters of the people whether they will increase their use of sunscreen beyond what they say they will do. If you just go by what people say they will do, you get fewer than half of the people accurately predicted, and using this brain region, we could do significantly better.”

ECONOMIC ANTIDOTE?

With companies suffering setbacks due to the real estate and stock market plunges, Morin says the brain has become marketing’s best potential weapon against a difficult economy. “It’s the only organ in the human body that shows evolutionary development,” he says. “You look at the new structure as the new cortex, under the limbic system where we feel and process emotions and the reptilian brain for motion and decision. Our brain responses are at the center of so many advertising messages.” But it’s studying words, he says, not just images, that can be extremely effective. “For example, the word you is the most influential word in English. It activates the survival-centered brain. This is why so many commercials fail when they just tell about their company’s accomplishments. Don’t tell us that. Tell us about us!”

ETHICAL DEBATE

Still, there are the ethical components. Many have long since accepted that advertising was trying to sell more than just horsepower when it came to cars, but literally getting inside our minds? “It’s important to talk about it,” Morin says. “Neuromarketing was born organically, and it comes from the excitement of a new way of looking at our behaviors. Take the analogy of how astronomers discover new stars in the galaxy. It’s impossible to stop the natural adaptive will of scientists to probe our minds.”

One ethical key is making sure people who sell product that are harmful are prevented from using these methods to manipulate even further, Morin says. Dooley notes in his blog how Martin Lindstrom, co-author of *Buyology: Truth and Lies About Why We Buy* (Crown Business, 2010) and leader of a three-year neuromarketing study of more than 2000 volunteers, found that even cigarette companies were getting to our psyches through, of all things, the warning label. “What’s so amazing with this is that it activates an area called the nucleus accumbens—It’s actually the craving spot,” Lindstrom says. “That means when I want to smoke, this little area’s activated. But guess what? Because we got used to those warning disclaimers, it becomes a hidden ad.”

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Still, it’s hard to say how widespread neuromarketing works as a strategy. Many advertising companies, Morin says, play it close to the vest, not wanting to be seen as putting us under mind control.

Dooley believes the future of neuromarketing won’t be all that different except that we’ll see less money wasted on ads through more concentrated messages. “Neuromarketing is used in the product-design phase more than the advertising-analysis phase, and that’s a mistake which will be adjusted,” he says. He also believes advertisers will use neuromarketing to put a greater value on the beginning and end of marketing messages. “The first few and last few seconds of a message are crucial for encoding of information,” he says. “It follows patterns of how we need to reboot our brains to go from one attention to the other. Attention is like software... it has to be adjusted.” [bw]