

Engaging Consumers' Brains: The Latest Learning

Marketers are fascinated with cognitive neuroscience, and understandably so. New brain imaging techniques seem to promise access to deeper insights into how people think about brands and what motivates their purchases. But more valuable to marketers than any brain-imaging tool are the advances neuroscience has provided in our understanding of how the brain works. In light of this new knowledge, they may choose to reconsider and refine their approaches to advertising and brand-building.



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In recent years, marketers enthralled with the possibilities of applying neuroscience techniques to consumer research have teamed up with brain science experts eager to find commercial applications for their work, thus giving rise to the new field of “neuromarketing.” A few studies in this new area have received widespread publicity, but our observation is that the results of these projects, while interesting, tend to confirm the value of traditional research. (And this is a good thing for all concerned, because the procedures involved in brain scanning research are far too cumbersome and expensive to apply broadly.) However, even if neuromarketing approaches are not yet ready for prime time, the field of neuroscience has a great deal to offer market researchers who want to understand the basic workings of the brain.

What Cognitive Neuroscience Tells Us About the Brain

The brain is modular

The brain is organized as a hierarchy of modules, in which discrete groups of neurons (the “modules”) are dedicated to processing different types of information. For example, one module might deal with visual stimuli, while another handles auditory input. Sets of these modules link up in a hierarchical manner to share data, culminating at the top level in three “mega-modules,” which manage three broad types of information: Knowledge, Experience, and Emotion. Information associated with these three areas can be described as follows:

- **Knowledge.** The concrete characteristics of an object, including its name, color, shape, and other material properties.
- **Experience.** Information pertaining to the way an object is used, handled, or experienced.
- **Emotion.** The affective or emotional information about an object or idea and its resultant value along a number of dimensions; e.g., is it good or bad, attractive or disgusting.

The “mental workspace” is ruled by relevance

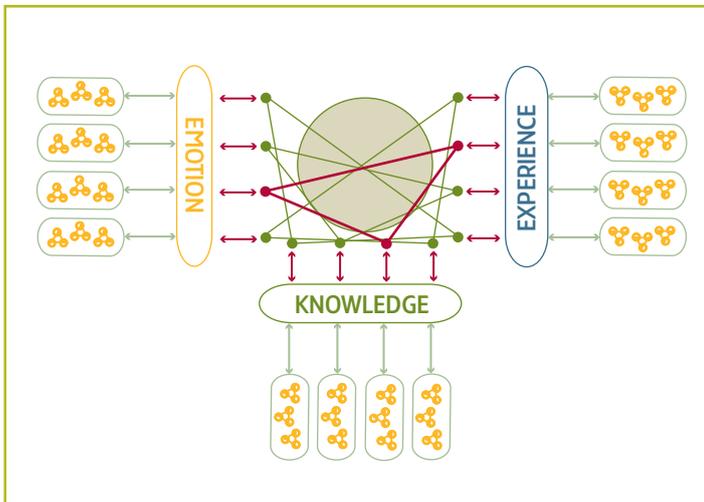
Information held in the three separate modules is not consciously perceived, and thus cannot be used, until it is integrated in the “mental workspace,” a specialized brain network that is central to complex cognition. The workspace has limited capacity, so as various bits of information compete for entry, the brain mechanisms of selective attention and emotion work together to gauge the relevance of the information to current or future goals. The information perceived to be most relevant at any given time will win a spot in the workspace.

GRAHAM PAGE

Global Director of Innovations
Millward Brown
graham.page@uk.millwardbrown.com
www.millwardbrown.com
www.mb-blog.com



The Mental Workspace Model



Only the information that is actually occupying the workspace can be acted upon, integrated with other information, or sent to long-term memory. But, importantly, this does not mean that the information that did not make it into the workspace is all equally “unattended.” Because this information has received some pre-conscious processing by attention and emotion, it may be in one of three different unattended states. It may be:

- **Primed/Passively ignored.** Not in the workspace, but on the fringe, this information can enter the workspace quickly when needed, but it has only short-lived and subtle behavioral effects unless it does so.
- **Inhibited/Actively ignored.** Trying to enter the workspace, but unable to because it is being actively suppressed, this information will be remembered poorly and devalued emotionally when it is encountered again.
- **Not registered.** Neither in the workspace nor vying for entry, this information has no effect on cognition or memory.

The currency of the brain is the representation

When information about objects and concepts is pulled from each of the three mega-modules, it is organized in the workspace into “representations.” The brain can only assemble one representation at a

time, and only three or four can exist in the workspace simultaneously. Representations of items that are highly familiar or of personal significance can be assembled more quickly than others. This advantage makes these “superfamiliar” representations more likely than others to influence decisions, as they can command time in the workspace more easily.

The brain “blinks”

The sequential process of assembling representations creates “blinks” in attention. No new information can be processed during these “blind spots” when the workspace is occupied. Therefore, if information is presented too quickly, it will not all be processed. The brain simply cannot deal with it fast enough.

The Implications for Marketing

Brands need strong associations in three areas

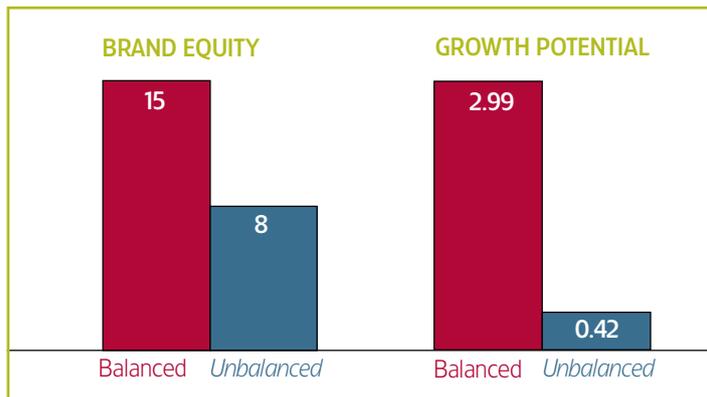
To the brain, a representation of a brand is no different than any other representation pulled together from the three mega-modules. If a brand is to come to mind easily and quickly, it must have clear and distinct associations in each of the three areas: Knowledge, Experience, and Emotion. Therefore, marketers must consciously address these areas. Marketers need to clearly project a brand’s identity, in terms of its name, physical characteristics and any other associated cues (such as slogans or mascots). Next they must make the brand’s benefits clear, and finally, they must endow the brand with a positive emotional value. If these associations are established especially well, the brand will become superfamiliar, and will command a dominant presence in the workspace.

If a brand lacks clear and distinct associations, neuroscience suggests that it will be unlikely to command a spot in the mental workspace when purchase decisions are made. Thus it is likely to face a disadvantage in the market. We have good evidence from survey research to support this concept. Millward Brown recently classified the brands in its brand equity database on two dimensions: the breadth of their mental associations, and the balance of these associations across the three mega-modules.



This exercise clearly showed that brands having good balance across the three modules were stronger in terms of equity and growth potential than those with an uneven distribution of associations.

Brands with Balanced Representations Are Far Healthier



Marketing campaigns must generate engagement

Information about a brand must make it into the mental workspace if it is to be integrated with existing brand perceptions or filed in long-term memory. Therefore, only material that makes it into the workspace has a chance of influencing later brand decisions. This means that marketers must persuade consumers to devote at least some mental resources to their campaigns. Otherwise they will be relying on the priming effects of low involvement, which neuroscience suggests are faint and fleeting.

Relevance is required for engagement

Information, including brand messaging, will be engaged with if it is determined to be relevant. Yet few brands are so important or interesting that consumers will engage with them every time they see or hear about them. Therefore, marketing communication needs to be relevant to consumers *at the time and place they encounter it*. Thus both the mindset and the motivation of a consumer encountering a particular form of media must be considered.

This idea strongly supports the common practice of topic-relevant media placement, and not simply because it means the right audience may be watching. When ads are placed in relevant programming or next to relevant editorial, they are also more likely to find people who are in the mindset to receive the message.

The consumer's mindset must be taken into account during the process of creative development as well. While engaging with TV, for example, viewers are often looking to be entertained, and are not actively seeking to learn about brands. But consumers are not always seeking entertainment. Sometimes they are looking for news, information, or edification. So, in addition to finding out whether an idea resonates with the target audience when advertising is developed, marketers must also think about what consumers are likely to be interested in when they encounter the advertising.

Integrated branding is crucial

Only the engaging elements of a marketing message will make it into the workspace and so have a chance to affect perceptions. Advertising researchers have observed this effect for years; only the interesting bits of ads stick in memory and get played back at ad recall questions. Therefore, when the brand and message are not intrinsically relevant (which will be most of the time), they must be integrated into the creative in a way that means they get into the workspace anyway.

Getting in the way is worse than not getting there at all

Because "active ignoring" has been shown to have devaluing effects, marketing communication that interrupts consumers when they are not receptive to it may have a negative effect on the brand. Therefore, as advertisers seek to engage with consumers through new communication channels, such as the Web or mobile phones, they need to do so in a way that does not distract users, but rather adds something to the content on those platforms. For example, when using the mobile phone as a medium, the personal nature of the device must be respected, and the nature of the message must fit the medium, offering, say, exclusive invites to relevant events.

Consumers need time to think

The existence of the "attentional blink" means that when loads of messages are crammed into marketing, the brain simply can't process them all. Key elements of communication, branding or comprehension will be missed. Copy test results bear this out; communication declines as the number of messages increases. Likewise, experimental work by Professor Jane Raymond of the Centre for Experimental Consumer Psychology shows



that quite subtle changes to the timing of video ads can greatly enhance communication and response by allowing different concepts to establish themselves in the workspace properly. Thus marketers must continue to strive for clarity and simplicity in messaging.

Implications for Research

There are at least three clear implications for research:

1. Any assessment of brand health needs to measure the strength of a brand's associations in terms of Knowledge, Experience, and Emotion. Most brand equity studies deal with the Knowledge module by attempting to measure familiarity with a brand's fundamental promise. Emotion has enjoyed more prominence in recent years as marketers have paid increased attention to the emotional connections people form with brands. But in terms of Experience, how many studies try to assess whether the brand has clear and compelling sensory cues?
2. The effectiveness of marketing campaigns must be evaluated in relation to what we know about the workings of the brain by addressing three questions:
 - Will the content resonate with the target audience and engage their attention? If not, the intended impression will never make it into long-term memory.
 - Will the engaging elements highlight the brand? Given the limited capacity of the mental workspace and the tendency for the brain to “blink,” it is all too easy for a brand to end up on the brain's cutting-room floor.
 - Will the associations created by the campaign result in a more positive appraisal of the brand, and will they help ensure that relevant brand representations are created?
3. The “footprint” of engagement is advertising memorability. Because memorability is an inevitable by-product of engagement, when consumers remember advertising, we can safely assume that they engaged with it.

Advertising awareness is not the only measure of advertising effectiveness—the impressions conveyed must also be motivating and linked to the brand—but science provides a strong rationale for it being a prerequisite for success.

Is brain scanning the future of market research?

We acknowledge that brain measurement techniques such as EEG or fMRI are incredibly powerful tools, legitimately used by academics and industry bodies to address the big questions about how marketing works. We continue to investigate the potential of these tools to add insight to our own qualitative and survey-based research, but to date, we have not found that the additional insight they provide justifies the costs and complexity they add to most research projects.

However, where we feel they may add insight, or make a more compelling case for our clients, we can apply these techniques. For example, Millward Brown has recently conducted a study for the UK's Newspaper Marketing Agency. The brain waves of 237 consumers were scanned to reveal the effect of advertising in a combination of media (in this case newspapers and TV) on brand perceptions, compared to the effect of either medium used in isolation. The results of this experiment clearly showed that an integrated campaign using both TV and newspapers generated a much more positive response.

To read more about neuroscience and branding, please visit www.mb-blog.com.

