

A new role for the unconscious

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Ninety-five percent of thinking takes place in our unconscious minds – that wonderful, if messy, stew of memories, emotions, thoughts, and other cognitive processes we're not aware of or that we can't articulate. Nonsense you may say, but think about it for a nanosecond.

If the brain provided us with all the information about what is constantly happening in our minds and bodies, and among all that, the small matter of the purchasing decisions we make, we would be biologically overwhelmed.

Historically, talking about the role of the unconscious in advertising has been taboo. For those within the industry, to acknowledge its role in decision-making would be to confess they never really understood the attitudes and behaviours of consumers.

The theoretical structure of advertising strategy today has placed a singular focus on the conscious over the unconscious. Almost every agency and in-house marketing function work with linear, 'Feel-Think-Do' type models to organise their campaign activity. They work on the premise that every purchasing decision is in itself rationalised and internalised through conscious consumer thought.

Briefs are written and structured around the same model: the ideas generated are validated through qualitative and quantitative testing methodologies, which rely on participants' conscious 'declarative' memory to tell us what they 'think'. By restricting ourselves to this conscious thought model, we are ignoring recent discoveries that demonstrate how it is actually the existence of the unconscious that is essential to our biological behaviour as human beings.

UNCOVERING THE UNCONSCIOUS

There are new, important findings in cognitive neuroscience which, within the area of marketing and advertising, lead us to consider a new point of view: that 'unconscious processing' is basic to a lot of human behaviour. Countless examples demonstrate this is the case. TNS, for instance, found important differences exist between what people say they do when choosing a product in a supermarket and what they really do. To develop effective advertising strategies and stimuli that persuade the consumer, we must accept that the unconscious has an active, relevant and real role.

We should start from the idea that the mind of the consumer is not a blank piece of paper. Using some of the new projective consumer research techniques, such as implicit response-time testing, can help with this. And to move the industry on it is crucial to learn to use such information and, moreover, to incorporate the biometric techniques that make what happens in the minds of consumers tangible.

BUILDING UNCONSCIOUS MEMORABILITY

Building our understanding of the unconscious will also help advertisers generate enduring 'memorability' – often regarded as the Holy Grail within the industry. Recent studies reveal that the neuronal systems that generate unconscious, implicit and emotional memories are different to those neuronal systems involved with conscious, explicit memories and those which refer to the physical sensation of an emotion or feeling. Moreover, the implicit memory has been shown to be more durable than explicit memory, having greater capacity and being independent of attention.

Antonio Damasio uses the following example to explain. When an individual receives an emotional stimulus such as seeing a bear, the most primitive part of our brain immediately prepares the body for action: the heart beats faster, the arteries dilate and adrenalin flows. These bodily changes are those which the cerebral cortex detects and connects with fight or flight emotions. The resulting mental image merges a combination of our unconscious emotions

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and conscious bodily changes. However, there are relatively few of these bear moments in advertising. And on many occasions we are unaware of these bodily and emotional changes since, causing less arousal, they can pass relatively unnoticed.

As marketers, this forces us to reconsider how we speak about emotional benefits and rational benefits. To date, advertisers have made distinctions between what they consider to be emotional advertising and rational advertising. However, this distinction only exists in the mind of marketing and research professionals, and not in the mind of the consumer. The brain simply does not work like a computer and, as such, memory is neither simple nor linear. The memory does not simply 'store' memories. From the moment we experience something, we interpret it, and on many occasions in an unconscious manner, edit or entirely rewrite our previous experiences unknowingly and unconsciously.

A NEW ROLE FOR THE UNCONSCIOUS IN ADVERTISING

Rather than being secondary, negative or dispensable, the role of the unconscious mind should be included as an additional element to be considered in an already complex advertising strategy. To quote A.K. Pradeep, founder of the company NeuroFocus: "Neuroscience teaches us that the subconscious level of the brain is where essential perceptions are registered and decisions are made. It is at this precognitive level of the mind where initial product interest, purchase or viewing intent, and brand loyalty are formed". In this sense, the most important thing at present, regardless of whether its use is intentional or not, is to be aware of the unconscious and accept its existence in order to develop better advertising strategies ■