

# Putting the person into context

Anthony Tasgal POV, explores some of the issues in how we seek to explain consumer behaviour

**T**HIS ARTICLE DERIVES from a seminar looking at the implications of neuromarketing. Like so many false dawns, neuromarketing tends to obscure the messy whole by drawing attention to one piece.

But I want to explore the assumptions we make when we look at 'consumer behaviour' and ask 'why?'

Let us start with two titans of modern philosophy: William James said that 'Cause is an altar to an unknown god.' Mary Poppins, on the other hand, claimed 'I never explain anything.'

## Pattern-seeking

We are, as a species, 'pattern-seekers', searching out meaning, causality and explanation.

Marketing is premised on uncovering behaviour, forging links and defining causal chains for marketing and communication (as in 'support for the message', 'why people should buy this', and so on, in briefing forms).

Starting from some of the Science vs Art issues raised in my 2003 paper (i) - specifically the notions of mechanistic control and what I called the 'Many Mês' - I want to look at this chain of causation that we employ almost unconsciously.

Let us examine some of the nested assumptions underlying this mental model (see Table 1).

1. As marketing people we are all in control, 'consumers' are to be targeted. I call this the myth of predictability.
2. One aspect of control is the tenet that cause (what we do) creates effect (what they do). It is time to give up the notion that everything happens in a straight line, for just one reason.
3. We have not completely settled on a model of the consumer (or person): we flit

between a number of incompatible variants. The image we tend to have of our 'consumer' may be:

the all-knowing, all-choosing superman

the computer, recording and processing all the purchasing-request-information before spewing out a purchasing answer

the unconscious zombie - looks like a human, talks like a human, but lacks true consciousness; insert image of your favourite *Big Brother* housemate here.

4. This is partly because the notion of the independent free-willed individual seems invulnerable, despite signs of barbarians clutching neuroscience texts at the gate.

5. Part of this is expressed as the belief that character and personality are consistent and stable: one person per body only, please.

Let us look at the five components of the causation model, and see what happens when we unpick and re-examine each of them.

## 1. Management

The meaning of the word management (as in 'brand') comes from the Latin, manus (hand), which is where we think we keep our lab-rat consumer - in the palm of our hands.

The simpler the model of cause and effect that we operate with, the more easily we can predict and control - and design research methodologies to fit.

## 2. The danger of thinking in straight lines

There are umpteen levels of causality: genes, accidents, infections, birth order, teachers, parents, circumstance, opportunity and chance can all be suggested to explain why people do things, what has led them to it.

Looking at the issue from another perspective, linear causality of the 'A causes B' type is being put under the critical microscope. The philosopher Walter Freeman has argued that attributing all action to linear causality is 'an addictive habit'. He claims that the whole metaphor of cause and effect is an illusion. Instead, he argues for 'circular causality', where an effect influences its own cause.

'Personality traits are not as important as we think, as they are not as consistent as we believe. When we think about it, it's apparent that the same person can be honest in one context, dishonest in another; outgoing in some situations, shy in others'

Another proponent of this view is Steve Grand. His world - we can use the term literally - is one of artificial life, or A-life. Grand is a programmer and scientist who produced *Creatures*, a computer game that allows players to create living beings, complete with brains, genes, and vital systems, that would live and breed in real time on an ordinary computer.

What I want to highlight from Grand's view of creation (an appropriate expression) is his argument that shows how pernicious the linear cause-effect model is. In his view, control is as much an effect as a cause, and what we see around us is a sea of cause and effect, ceaselessly feeding back on itself. The dominant metaphor is the web not the chain - but a web with various feedback mechanisms.

So, we have to look to create responses and measure them with the honest acceptance that they may be messy, chaotic, emergent and unpredictable. Not features that fit easily in standard tracking or usage and attitude studies, or cheap 'n' dirty groups.

The parallel is that sometimes we may achieve great things for our brand or ad, and assume a simple causal one-to-one relationship with its Aristotelian first ^

TABLE 1

### Neuroscience and the nested assumptions of linear causality

1. We like to control 'them'.
2. We cause, they effect.
3. They are only a computer/zombie.
4. How free is will?
5. Questioning the individual.

cause (a strategy, an ad, whatever), when it was the result of a whole chain of events that may have had something to do with our first cause or be a result of the cascades it has set in motion: Correlation is Causality.

### 3. Consumer no. 1?

An aspect of the linear chain is the characterisation of the consumer. There have been a number of varieties, all of them more or less amenable to controllability. Gordon and Valentine highlighted 'Barbie' as the default consumer (2).

On the face of it, Superman seems an unlikely model, but has been used as here for several reasons. First, it is a relic of the old behaviouristic model where the subject acts without the intervention of attitudes, values or doubt. Superman is all-powerful in the sense that he sees everything in simple black-and-white terms, and makes decisions on a rational, utilitarian basis.

The consumer as-computer has also been seen in various guises. This has been a favourite metaphor since the computer became our iconic image to replace previous editions (such as clockwork) for describing the universe or, more recently, the brain. Marketing favours it because of the attractiveness of the input-output model: insert brand/communication message here, wait for purchasing output there.

Much ink has been spilled on this issue, but one of the main failures in the metaphor lies with the fact that the brain constantly changes. Connections in frequent use grow stronger, those used infrequently decay more rapidly. Hence 'use it or lose it'. Brain scientists talk of plasticity.

As far as people's behaviour is concerned, the danger lies in using language like 'processing' or 'computation', and drawing misleading parallels with different types of memory. This completely misses all the emotional embodiment that comes with the human package, and is absent from even your customised Dell.

A third option is to see the consumer as zombie. The zombie is beloved of philosophers for thought experiments. It is the name they give to an entity that behaves

outwardly like a human, but has no consciousness.

I think that many clients cherish this image of their 'target audience': they do everything that you want, without the uncomfortable presence of attitudes, desires, drives or values.

### 4. Free will/won't?

The next component of the model is the belief in absolute free will. I have talked about this in the context of what I term 'arithmocracy', but want to reinforce it here.

The recent infatuation with neuroscience has led to much soul-searching (figuratively?) in the planning and research worlds. What is intriguing - if unverifiable - is the feeling among many scientific thinkers that free will may be one of the first casualties of this body of thinking.

Those who question the role (or the scale) of free will tend to pounce on work by Benjamin Libet. He showed that the electrical impulse that initiates action occurs a half second before we take a conscious decision to act. Instead of deliberating, then doing, the brain prepares us for action, then we have the experience of acting. Libet tried to rescue the notion of free will in the sense of a veto, where consciousness actively overrides the brain's action (later named the 'free won't').

This reminds me of a couple of sayings. ^ 'How do I know what I think till I see what I say?' (E.M. Forster)

^ 'Do we believe in free will? We have to - we have no choice.' (Isaac Bashevis Singer)

### 5. One person per body: the postmodern plasticine era?

We are entering what might be termed the plasticine era (apologies to palaeo-anthropologists), just before the Pliocene.

The notion that there is a unified, consistent, unchanging essence within the mind (heart? breast?) of each consumer looks increasingly implausible.

In *Tomorrow's People: how 21st century technology is changing the way we think and feel*, Susan Greenfield has written that: 'You can choose how you appear to others

and how they interact with you. The ego may disappear as you become a passive recipient of the cyberworld.'

This fits in with the fragmented post-modern self.

Postmodernism places much store by the notion of fragmentation. Rejecting the old idea of 'meta-narratives', universal and homogeneity, it prefers to look at how things have broken into (often irreconcilable) pieces. PoMo believes that the self is at best a fiction, at worst an assemblage of different costumes.

There is a serious point here: personality traits are not as important as we think, as they are not as consistent as we believe. When we think about it, it is apparent that the same person can be honest in one context, dishonest in another; outgoing in some situations, shy in others. Part of this is to do with cognitive dissonance: the tendency to select only evidence that consistently supports our view of ourselves or others.

What have we forgotten? Context is all. A specific example is what is known as the fundamental attribution error: the dilemma between disposition (or personality) and situation (or context).

We often find ourselves judging a person and their qualities through their reactions to a particular situation, without pausing to reflect on how much the context may have dictated the response. How would we, or anyone, react in that context? Researchers investigating the abuses at Abu Ghraib have recently explored how context can create such transformations.

**'Marketing is premised on uncovering behaviour, forging links and defining causal chains for marketing and communication'**

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## The practical stuff

Let us look towards a new model of causality.

1. Much of what we have discussed follows from the old command-and-control metaphor of brand management and communication. The tone of voice is one of parental authority and righteousness: try this because it is good for you; because we say so.

2. In the spirit of postmodern blurring, the metaphor I propose comes from a blending of two widely different, but strangely concurrent, areas: parenting, and Steve Grand's artificial life worlds.

3. From the parenting point of view, I suggest that we should all approach targeting less in the mould of Victorian parenting (parents know best, authority is all, do as we say or else). Instead, let us acknowledge that parents are not authoritarian sculptors or designers of their children's lives and personalities. (The reality is closer to a cab driver, except the money goes the other way).

The dominant metaphor now sees parents as offering choices supportively, and seeing what evolves: hyper-parenting without the hype. This supports the notion that the parent/child relationship can mirror the brand owner/consumer connection.

4. The world of programming is also instructive. Steve Grand and the A-lifers have managed to create something approaching life (allowing for minor philosophical quibbles), through some simple steps. Their achievement has not been to programme intelligent behaviour, but to enable it to emerge from simulated objects. The process has been bottom-up, more about nudge and cajole, less about command and control.

Perhaps the reason for so much failure in new product development (NPD) and brand (re-)positioning is that we expect too much top-down control of what we have 'designed'. I appreciate that the target-driven culture would find this hard to stomach, but if it's a new paradigm it may need a period of unsettling before it becomes adopted, if ever. In a marketing environment where the wiki world has turbo-charged user generated content, this can only accelerate.

5. A second metaphor worth considering is horticultural. Though I share Woody Allers analysis that 'I am at two with nature', it is worth raising. It sees us as the gardener, sowing seeds, creating the conditions (context) for growth and fruition. (I suspect this might appeal to those researchers who like nothing better than collapsing in front of the TV on a Friday evening, and to agency personnel who find it awkward describing what they do at dinner parties, and feel a tip towards Earth Mother/Gaia imagery might make them more socially acceptable.)

6. Maybe the problem is that we are expecting to design something to run before it can walk. Perhaps we need to let it work out by itself how to walk and then it will figure out how to run by itself. To pursue a different metaphor, we may need to create a context for evolution that results in new mutations.

## Some research implications

1. Re-designing questionnaires: how might we revise how we draw up quantitative studies to appreciate properly the role of context? Why not acknowledge the complexity more overtly?

- What would make you... ?

► In what circumstances would you consider... ?

► When might you feel like... ?

► How does it make you feel when... ?

There is a price to pay for this in terms of logistics, but it is surely not insurmountable.

2. Qualitatively, this suggests a refining of questions we ask (or how we ask them). The use of more projective material and bricolage generally, and ethnographic approaches specifically, may help us understand more about contexts and contextualisations for a brand or its communication. The more in situ the better.

3. NPD specifically may benefit from this. Evolving brands in context means leaving more brands in situ, and allowing their (best) use and positioning (targeting) to emerge. It means placing a premium on 'stickiness' and allowing time for the right 'contextualisation' to emerge, rather than forcing a positioning on to it, as often happens.

4. Measuring brands in contexts leaves traditional tracking studies in a quandary. At the least it would require greater 'projection' in order to create the contexts we are envisaging.

## Creative briefs

Finally, the linear, sequential creative brief is due for a review.

It is a standard assumption that the process is straightforward and linear itself. It may be no coincidence that the so-called transportation models of communication reflect this.

It may be time to move agencies (and their clients) into accepting briefs that more truly reflect the complexity of cause-effect-cause discussed here.

At the least I would recommend looking at abandoning the target-proposition-substantiation sequence.

1. Let us make brand propositions/messages less about searching for some universal 'truth' and more about meaning. Less of 'what the client wants/knows/thinks' and more about adding more meaning(s) to people's lives. And when we talk about 'substantiation' let us be careful that we are not just parroting something that underlines that truth (and its irrelevance).

2. There is an established custom in articles like this to propose some new nomenclature for the marketing, research or ad industries. So, here are a few thoughts to pursue.

► Consider moving away from 'target audience' towards 'current contexts' and then to 'desired contexts'. Desired response is a precursor of this, but emphasising context seems clearer. For context, we fill in boxes with 'when', 'with whom', 'with what'; the mood before, the mood after, rather than the dead hand of proposition-support.

► Perhaps replacing 'proposition' with 'emotionalisation' or 'contextualisation' would reinforce this. Then the 'support' section could escape from the client litany and focus on the moods, emotions and contexts that enable the emotionalisation.

► Objectives should be set in the language of cascades and web effects, rather than

It is about always thinking about the whole person, in all their internal and social complexity, not just a set of neurons firing. It is something we need to do urgently in all the areas of our discipline, if it is not to be taken over by the siren call of the nothing butters, who say that behaviour, or intention, is nothing but this or that'

simple 'If this, then that'. We should express the level of cascade effects we envisage: with whom, how each affects the next, how the behaviour might affect attitude, and possibly reinforce the behaviour.

• This may help avoid the brief as the spewed litany of inert factoids (see Figure 1).

**Messy holism and nothing butters**

In a humbly *sub-Primary Colors* piece of self-outing, I should confess to being behind the term 'Neuromantics' cited by David Penn(3).

I use the term, not only to date my 19805 formative musical influences, but because it's helpful in reminding some of the more easily swayed that we should beware of researchers bearing gifts.

While neuroscience has much to teach us about how the brain responds to marketing and Communications, I fear that our industry has been blinded by the science of a very exciting new technological toy.

I am concerned that, in the hands of the Neuromantics, neuromarketing will become yet another of a battery of research devices and approaches that seek to understand people by breaking them down into component parts rather than looking at the complex, messy whole.

I believe it's a sterile and partial view, like trying to understand a sentence by

looking only at the meaning of individual words when what you need is knowledge of grammar and context. So, in the interests of developing a new grammar for consumer insight, I have tried to look at the whole person and question some of the assumptions that underlie our current understanding of consumer behaviour.

All these are different ways of viewing individual behaviour. But there are many strands of thought emerging that cast further doubt on some of the assumptions we make about the individual as a free agent.

There are new disciplines emerging, such as neurosociology, which brings together neuroscientists, psychologists and anthropologists to study the neural basis for social interaction. It does not just look at individuals, but asks what is it that creates ideas and beliefs.

Econophysics, popularised by Philip Ball's *Critical Mass*, among others, looks at collective behaviour and sees us as atomistic parts of a whole, using the language of epidemiology. It sees individual actions as part of a bigger picture. And let us not forget the related notion of the meme, which is a cultural analogue of the gene. It's the idea that ideas have a life of their own. They spread like genes and have a desire to colonise people's minds.

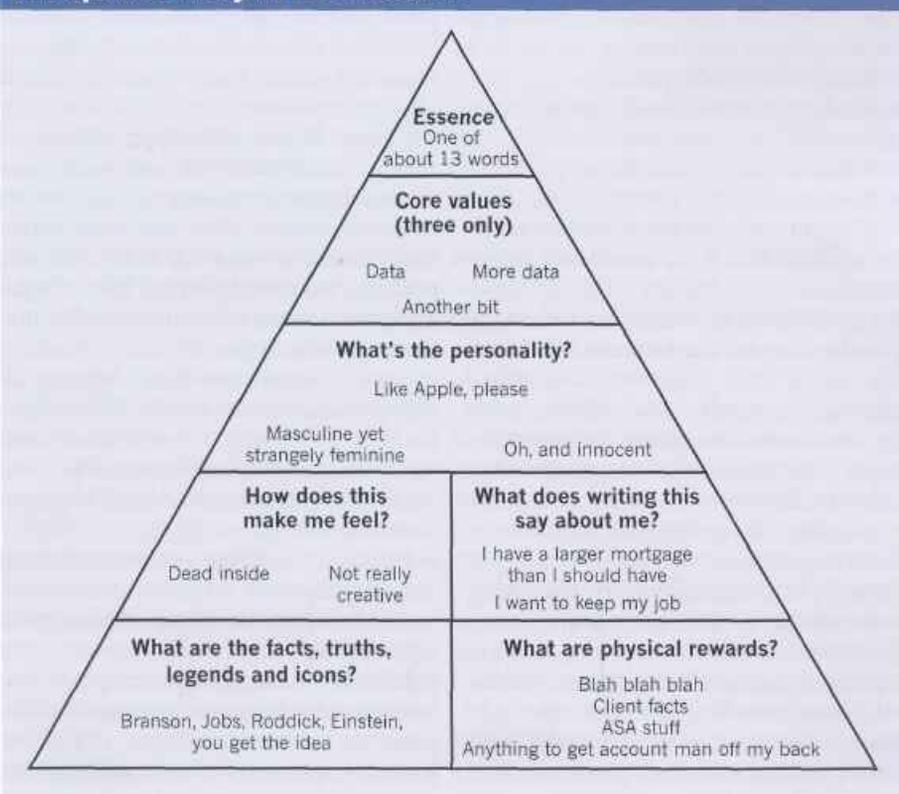
Finally, it is about always thinking about the whole person, in all their internal and social complexity, not just a set of neurons firing. It is something we need to do urgently in all the areas of our discipline, if it is not to be taken over by the siren call of the nothing butters, who say that behaviour, or intention, is nothing but this or that.

The British biologist and half of the team that uncovered the double helix, Francis Crick, once claimed that consciousness was 'nothing but synchronized firing in the range of 40 Hertz'. True, but only in so far as it related to neural correlates. For the rest of us, hardly that insightful.

So, let us not allow another aspect of scientific reductionism that risks being amplified by neuroscience. ■

FIGURE 1

**The spewed litany of inert factoids**



1. A Tasgal: *The science of brands*. MRS Conference, 2003.
2. W Gordon and V Valentine: *The 21st century consumer: a new model of thinking*. MRS Conference, 2000.
3. D Penn: *A new enlightenment: why the next 50 years will be different*. MRS Conference, 2007.

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