

Exploring the brain

Roderick White outlines some of the issues for marketing communications raised by the development of neuroscience

MARKETING AND MARKETING communications pursue an uncertain balance between art and science - although, as Tim Ambler points out, Claude Hopkins was writing about 'scientific advertising' in the 1920s.

So when marketers start to get excited about a sector of 'real' science, it is the duty of the objective commentator to take a somewhat sceptical view of what is going on. The rising profile of neuroscience in marketing research, and its translation into the fashionable topic of neuro-marketing, is a good case in point.

Gut instinct

Part of the armoury of intelligent marketers over the years has been an understanding and awareness of consumer psychology. For the gut-feel merchants, this is largely instinctive: many good salesmen and entrepreneurs are extremely shrewd judges of people, of what they might want and how to persuade them to buy. Those of us less talented in this direction have tried to bridge the gap by mining the findings of academic psychologists to gain insights into the processes by which people respond to marketing communications and take purchasing decisions.

As cognitive psychology, and in particular the study of the brain and its workings, have progressed - the latter especially rapidly in the last 15 years - the ways in which we believe people process and respond to ads and other commercial stimuli have become (somewhat) clearer. We know a fair amount about how ads are perceived and the neurological processes by which brand images are developed and strengthened.

The addition to this knowledge of the ability to literally look into the brain via one or other of the various forms of brain-scanning technology has excited plenty of researchers, and led at least some marketers to believe that the ultimate goal of accessing consumer brain activity to guide communication strategy and its execution is just around the corner. And there have already been a number of 'experts', armed with access to a scanner, who have been happy to encourage this view.

Limited resolution

At present, the ability of the most sophisticated scanners to explore the ways in which consumers' brains work when confronted with an ad or any other brand stimulus is in practice fairly limited. The machinery is not, mostly, 'user-

friendly', as anyone who has actually been in an fMRI scanner will testify, so that the research set-up is strictly a 'laboratory' one. And the resolution, in time or space, provided by the various forms of scanner, even including the most adaptable, the good old electroencephalogram (EEG), is far from sensitive. We cannot trace a stimulus precisely through the neural pathways.

And, when we do the best we can to do this, we don't know what what we can see actually means. So, at present, while we can, for example, say with reasonable confidence that a particular stimulus produces a response from an area of the brain that is typically associated with (say) pleasure, there is not a lot more information in this observation than just that.

So, so far at least, brain scans have told us, in practice, nothing that we did not know already from simpler, more traditional forms of market research - asking questions of respondents.

There is, in effect, a substantial disconnection between the theoretical knowledge that we have of how the brain is wired up and our ability to observe that wiring in action. We must, at least, wait for a new generation of scanning equipment to get very much further.

This is not to say that cognitive neuroscience has no ability to help us - or at least to discourage us from too many naive assumptions and interpretations. It is the cognitive psychologists who have been able to show, reasonably conclusively, that every decision we take is at least mediated by emotion (a finding amply confirmed by brain scans), and to confirm that many of our decisions are in fact made literally on autopilot. Our illusion of our own rationality is, clearly, misleading.

Shades of memory

We know, too, enough about the mechanisms of memory to recognise that much of what we remember is acquired without conscious effort - the 'learning' model does not apply - and that we are quite capable of seeing and storing in our memories a range of material that we cannot readily recall, unless we are given a visual cue to stimulate the relevant network of neurons. Exactly how the various parts of our memories work remains a matter for some dispute: although psychologists can describe short-term memory, long-term memory, and a shadowy intermediary called working memory the precise ways in which the process works are still obscure, and the picture is further complicated by distinctions

between, for example, episodic and semantic memory, which function rather differently within long-term memory.

All this, of course raises some awkward questions for researchers - questions that have been well aired by (for example) Robert Heath and Mark Earls - and should cause those of us who are involved in planning marketing communications to think very hard about how the models we are (often almost unconsciously) using of how ideas are transferred into our target audiences' brains might relate to the apparent realities of human perception and thought processes.

As an aside, it is worth pointing out that all the available evidence points to the fact that memories are strengthened by re-stimulation (or what psychologists call 'rehearsal', though this is usually referring to active learning): the activation of a neural pathway strengthens the physical connections within it. The implication of this for advertisers is that repetition matters: an ad message may be powerful enough when seen once to create a clear impression (in practice a distributed network of neurons) in someone's memory; but without at least occasional re-stimulation, that memory will weaken and fade.

What, of course, we do not know is exactly what sort of stimulus is the minimum required to ensure that the neural brand network is refreshed sufficiently to aid the next purchase decision. It is quite easy to believe that this is where integrated marketing may have its strengths: a TV ad, the sight of the packaging, the brand name seen on a TV programme ident, a flash of the brand's dominant pack colour... may, conceivably, each be able to stimulate the brain sufficiently to reinforce the relevant memory.

An ongoing project

As should be clear from this - and from the articles that follow - the science of the brain is an evolving field, in which the sorts of certainty that marketers aspire to when selling their plans to their colleagues are not yet to be found. Nonetheless, the project of developing a better understanding of what goes on in the 1-3kg of tacky grey matter (red, actually, until it's taken out and preserved) hidden in all our skulls is a worthwhile one, in so far as it should help us do a better job of working out how to communicate with our target audiences. And clever marketers and scientists will doubtless continue to push beyond the secure findings of brain science in search of competitive advantage. •

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