

Neuromarketing: useful or useless?



Useful, argues Robin Wight, president of Engine and WCRS

IT IS SLIGHTLY over 40 years since I entered advertising as a fledgling copywriter. Much has changed since then, from the growth of the web to the explosion of mobile phones.

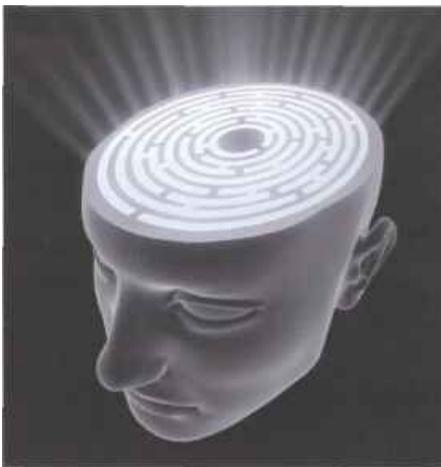
What hasn't changed, (and that ought to be ringing alarm bells throughout our industry), is the way we measure advertising communication. Good old focus groups and quantitative research, tracking conscious minds, still keep the likes of Millward Brown fat and purring.

Focus groups, in case you've forgotten, were called that because they were meant to allow one to 'focus' on what questions to ask in the ensuing quantitative research. For all their relative inexpensiveness, focus groups are revealed by decades of evidence to be a hugely misleading way to reveal what consumers really think. But they have the advantage of empowering researchers into the role of witch doctors, reading the 'entrails' of consumer wisdom. So, perhaps it's not surprising that so many market researchers are so out of date

about brain scans (exactly as cognitive dissonance theory would predict).

However, a cursory study of the literature shows that it's possible to predict behaviour from brain scans. Within a couple of decades, brain scan research will have evolved to answer questions about brand empathy and brand learning from a communication just by studying mirror neurons in the brain - and without having to rely on the inaccuracy of consumer self-reporting. (Brain scans can already reveal when consumers are telling lies, which existing research cannot.)

Already, machine learning can interpret brain scan data, allowing the comput-



stimuli. So now, we can wire up a respondent and understand everything we need to know about them. Right?

Wrong. Brain scanning technologies are in their infancy. The primary application of this technology is in the health industry, in areas such as detection of an epileptic attack in young people. But the ability of these machines to understand or predict consumer behaviour has a very long way to go. No-one yet knows enough about the brain and its functions to properly interpret the outputs. The technology is not ready yet. Nor will it be for many years to come.

Even if we were able to correctly interpret this data, it could not account for the huge impact that other people have on our decisions. As Mark Earls has spent the past few years insisting, "it is the space between us that is the most important to understand when trying to influence large numbers of people in a community".

Evidence of this was demonstrated in a DDB study, which proved that the more well-known a brand is, the more people, proportionately, claim to really love it.

er to work out the correlations, not the researcher. Recent (yet to be published) brain scan research shows where brand loyalty behaviour occurs in the brain. And we're only a few steps away from predicting consumer behaviour by reading brain scans. Brain scan research was able to predict the choice that would be made in a blind date situation just by reading the outputs from the scanner.

Some find this alarming - particularly those whose livelihood depends on the existing flawed methodologies. But clients, whose new product failure rates are just as high as they were 40 years ago, can only welcome the evolution of new technologies (imperfect as they are at the moment) that can refresh the parts that other research technologies cannot reach.

All this goes well beyond communication research: brain scanning equipment has been applied to identify what stimulates craving and status-seeking. And the costs of collecting and mining brain activity has fallen by half since 2007, to about \$50,000 to obtain and analyse these sorts of conscious desires of 30 to 50 people.

This new technology moves us from the world of misleading explicit responses to a world of measuring implicit responses to communication. I think this is an exciting breakthrough.

This rather counterintuitive fact proved that knowing that other people know and love a brand is a greater influencer on people than the illusion of personal preference. As a recent RSA study into the 'social brain' puts it "The idea that all decisions flow from an executive rational subject, in principle capable of operating in isolation from others, now appears to be at worst false and at best unhelpful."

So, even if we could properly understand the meaning behind all the brain activity we can measure, no amount of in-depth knowledge about how individuals are responding to stimulus in isolation will ever provide an accurate read of reality. Neuromarketing researchers are looking in the wrong place if they hope to understand how we make decisions and form our preferences as a community.

It's the so-called low-tech approach that focuses on interpreting and evaluating human behaviour in context, blending different streams of reported and observed behaviour, which will provide what guidance marketers and others need to guide their thinking.



Useless, says Vincent Nolan, founder of 2CV and chairman of Cello Research Group

WHEN THE 'NEW brain science began to leak into our collective consciousness in the mid-90s, I was as excited as the next research guru. While much of what was revealed confirmed my experience as a qualitative researcher, crucially it gave credence to our instinct that emotions play a critical role in decision-making. Incredibly, nearly 20 years later, this is yet to be widely accepted or integrated into mainstream research thinking.

So, we have finally started to understand how the brain works. We can capture bio-data and eye-tracking shows where consumers are paying attention. EEG scans allow us to see brain activity and observe how it changes with different