

The mind, the brain and the media

Sue Elms and John Svendsen, Carat Insight, show how modern psychology can inform thinking for media and creative strategies

THE BRIEF FOR this article was to review how understanding from psychology and neuroscience help improve media planning and buying.

The aim of this article is to show how valuable psychology has been in providing a new paradigm for communications planning. For 50 years, psychologists have been describing how the mind works and the way people process advertising. By the late 1980s, a really useful processing model was available for media planners to use. Sadly, most practitioners have not adopted this thinking and they still cling to the Cognitive Hierarchical Response model (AIDA, *et al*). But it is not too late for some of us to embrace that thinking now.

Neuroscience is all about how the brain works, its processes and cellular activity, synaptic connections and firing neurons. Thanks to scanning technology it has developed greatly over recent years, but so far has only added a bit of science to back up some of what we already knew (but possibly chose to ignore). Whether or not neuroscience will deliver anything as profound as the psychologists have is unclear.

For now, let us look at and use the new paradigm that the psychologists have already given us.

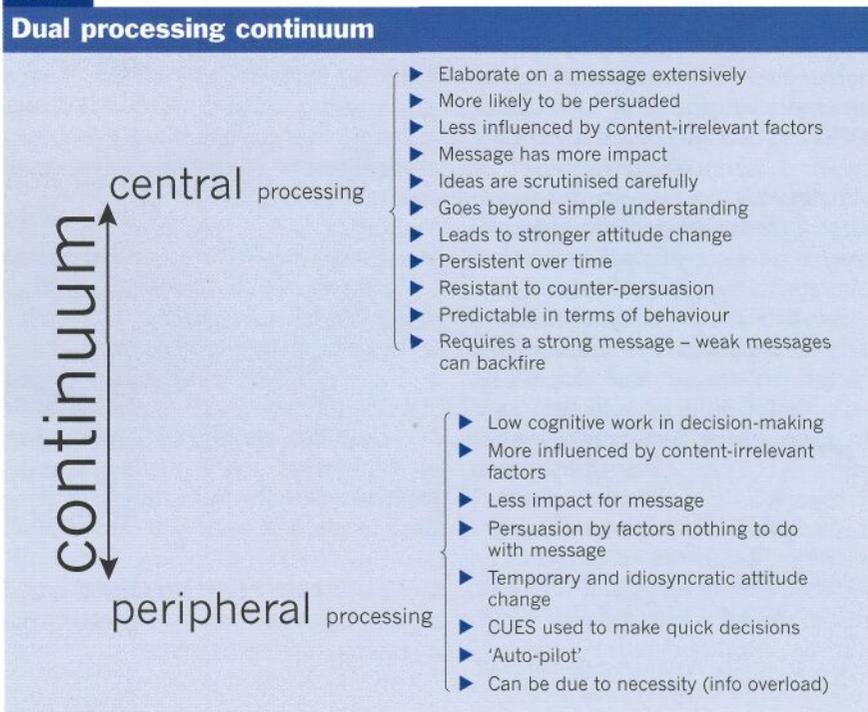
A new universal framework

At Carat Insight we have developed a new Universal Framework to guide the development of communications planning. It considers Hierarchical Response (1) in the context of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (2) and delivers a planning framework that can make room for low-attention processing (3) and nudge advertising (4). This means we are not wedded to any one theory of how advertising works, and we can work with the most appropriate one for a given brand's circumstances.

Dual processing

In 1980, psychologists from Ohio University - Petty and Cacioppo - created the Elaboration Likelihood Model of

FIGURE 1



persuasion (ELM). They had studied the many theoretical approaches to how attitudes are changed within the field of psychology and proposed (and tested) a general framework that described two routes to persuasion - central and peripheral. These two ways that people process messages describe a continuum of processing (see Figure 1).

Before embarking on any communications planning it is essential to place our target audience on the processing continuum from peripheral (weak, low elaboration) to central (strong, high elaboration). This is because there are specific and unique features of central processing that can be leveraged, and the same goes for peripheral processing. Thanks to Robert Heath, people more willingly accept that a lot of advertising works in a very peripheral way. This is not an admission of the weakness of advertising, but an essential reality check that will lead to more effective communication.

When things lie somewhere between

the two poles, diagnosing precisely why generates ideas for improving processing or leads to reasons to use peripheral strategies.

How do I find out where I sit on the continuum?

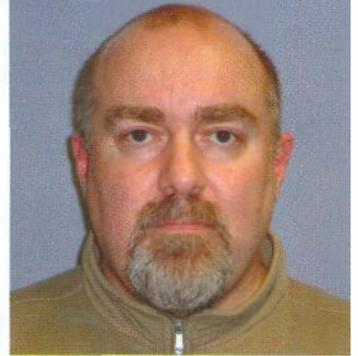
Insights from many academics explain the antecedents to central processing and we have set these out in the box, right. It makes things simpler to note that core processing only happens if a person has both the ability and motivation to process your message.

There are many clues in the existing research a brand owner has sitting around and we have developed further methodologies to diagnose the situation, taking into account a range of perspectives (consumer, brand and market communications).

Another source of insight is post-evaluation, if the right design is used (conventional tracking studies do not capture this). We have our own method



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for post-evaluation that statistically links individual communication to brand associations. We have seen clear indications of central processing and peripheral processing in these studies.

For example, we have seen specific ads really hit the bull's-eye in terms of connecting to intended brand associations alone and in synergy with the same messages in other media, which is a clear indication of central processing. Conversely, we have seen (many) specific ads failing entirely to connect to any brand associations while they have delivered ad recall measures - for example, 'you see this brand everywhere' and 'they do good advertising'. Many readers will have experienced qualitative research respondents feeding back lots of cues like jingles, characters and even end lines without being able to elaborate at all on the product or service.

Response hierarchies

A lot of advertising assumes an AIDA 'think-feel-do' model that implies advertising is about persuading people through message learning and that behaviour always comes after attitude change. But, despite the fact that this rather suits advertising agencies (putting advertising

at the top of the agenda), this is not always the case and there are four key hierarchies to consider.

By considering people's relationships to markets and the degree to which they perceive product/brand differentiation within these markets we reintroduce the concept of hierarchical response.

Alongside the three existing hierarchies we also consider the non-hierarchical thinking put forward by Ehrenberg: ATR (awareness, trial, reinforcement) or 'nudge'.

1. The learning hierarchy happens in high-involvement situations when brands are considered different. A core processing situation links directly with a learning hierarchy, where attitudes precede behaviour and the order of effects are 'think', 'feel' and then 'do' (note that think and feel can happen simultaneously). This is familiar AIDA and persuasion territory, and advertising is significant in the marketing mix.

2. The dissonance hierarchy occurs when there is high involvement but alternative brands in a category are not seen as different. Here, people are not centrally processing messages, as a norm. However, sometimes they experience the brand through means other than media brand advertising (for example special

offer in a shop, sales call by phone). This leads them to reassess their attitudes and perhaps move more towards central processing.

3. The low-involvement hierarchy: low-involvement situations are when brands are not considered different. This is in true peripheral-processing territory. In this case, advertising acts as a relatively weak force in the greater scheme of things, and it is as likely that behaviour precedes attitude than the other way around. Is low-attention processing a particular instance of this?

4. Nudge happens in very-low-involvement situations when brands are not considered different. This is Ehrenberg's contribution to our understanding of the way advertising works. In fact, in nudge, there is no hierarchy of effect. The role of advertising is secondary to other marketing levers and is simply there to nudge action.

Strategic implications of the hierarchies

► **The combined framework** creates a map and each position on the map leads to specific strategic considerations, as covered below. In summary, however, a central-processing situation is linked to ►

Antecedents to central processing

Ability to process

Topic-relevant knowledge

Someone is more able to process the message if it pertains to something they already know about. When a person has a high degree of personal experience with information conveyed they are more likely to pay attention and get deeper into the message. In fact if one has purchased, even via the peripheral route, that's an experiential basis to improve the chance of central processing.

No distraction

Kids screaming for dinner, lots of competitive clutter, minds elsewhere. Someone may not have the opportunity to process at that time. The information may be too complex, use too much jargon or difficult diction - this will stop someone elaborating the message

Repetition

Repetition increases the possibility of elaboration as long as the message is strong. However, once the message has been elaborated, over-exposure can be negative.

Motivation to process

Personal relevance

The number of things a person can scrutinise is limited, therefore we tend to focus on things that are personally relevant.

Need to know

Some people have a need for cognitive clarity regardless of the issue and they will think carefully about many more messages than others.

Mood

Making someone feel good helps him or her feel favourable towards you. Even if a message recipient is motivated and able to consider the merits of an issue, the message must elicit primarily favourable thoughts.

the learning hierarchy of response. In this situation, people are willing and able to elaborate on messages and be persuaded; brands are considered as differentiated; and so there are good opportunities to put forward messages on these points of difference. A way to enhance communications will be to apply the Message Learning Model (5) as well as seeking ways to enhance people's ability and motivation to process messages (see box on previous page).

There is a general preference to apply strategies that assume central processing. It seems a lot more exciting and strategic to develop sponsorship ideas or target sexier environments or moments, assuming that the receiver of this communication will engage with the message.

But people cannot be forced to engage, and more often than not will ignore you, or actively avoid engagement. There will be many situations when people will not centrally process or be persuaded by specific advertising messages, and we need to accept that clever media will not fix this.

The good news is that effective communications can be achieved in peripheral processing circumstances; things just work in a different way. Academics agree that in peripheral-processing situations an emphasis must be made on grabbing attention through obvious cues.

'Since the central route to persuasion is rather difficult, the peripheral route may sometimes be an effective advertising strategy ... It will be necessary to remind the recipient constantly of the cue... upon which he or she based the new attitude' (2).

It makes sense that one can influence an association via a communication, cue in this way - for example, a theme tune, person, visual mnemonic, being known for clever ads, and so on.

► **Central processing/learning** As well as enhancing people's ability and motivation to process messages, we have the opportunity to employ the Message Learning Model in full. There is broad academic agreement on four message-learning factors - source factors, message factors, channel factors and receiver factors. The view is that each of these factors can improve communication effectiveness if they are exploited well, especially if they are aligned.

We have seen a great example of this at play in the cost per response of a 'men's aid' product, where a DRTV spot placed in a men's health programme slashed the usual cost per response by two-thirds.

Without revealing the product, we can say only that the product was certainly something some men would centrally process and the placement was not lost on them.

Some of the media implications are that people who will core-process will recognise the relevance of placement (good for environment strategies) and will engage with arguments (good for logical arguments and copy length). They will understand the message quickly, and this will have frequency and wear-out implications. This is not just about matching content but also about matching mood.

► **Peripheral processing/dissonance** The key here is getting people into this 'disonance' position first. Nestle's decision to stick a Kit Kat Chunky to the front page of the *Sun* newspaper is an example of this in action, leading to brand reappraisal (6).

This does not mean advertising has no role to play: it is just that it will be harder to get people to engage with any message.

A media planner should look for opportunities within the six prerequisites of ability and motivation to encourage greater message processing. That said, we should also be ensuring that peripheral cues are maximised, as the general tendency is in that arena.

Baileys' sponsorship of *Sex and the City* drove emotional cues about the type of women, mentality and lifestyle associated with drinking Baileys. This, with the TV ads at that time, made people reappraise the brand and buy more of the product.

Media implications are that getting people to experience the brand is the best option. People process the cues, not the

argument, and these cues must be explicit, consistent and around for a long time.

► **Peripheral processing/low involvement** Using this route, you are trying to influence through grabbing attention and driving cues that might strengthen good brand associations and, hopefully, encourage action that increases product or service experience. The box (below, left) outlines six types of peripheral cue that the academics have suggested we can seek to employ.

The 118 118 directory enquiries service is a great example here: 118118 advertised all the time, everywhere, with a clever way of re-enforcing the phone number. Lots of cues about winning and getting there fast. They made no attempt to get you to process an argument.

Media implications are that repetition, consistency and cues should be used to get people to learn by rote rather than understanding. Do not waste money on premium alignment strategies - they will go unnoticed.

► **Nudge** In this situation people are not motivated to process messages at all. It is no use whatsoever to spend money trying to convey a specific message to these people, other than to simply 'be there' as cost-effectively as possible. Therefore, there is no need say too much, but make a noise relevant to the brand.

Fmcg is an obvious category from which to draw an example. Time and again modelling supports a recency strategy at one exposure where proximity to the decision point is important. We also see inertia, where brand leaders and market shares are hard to influence.

Media implications are to lose any hang-ups over what you say (but beware negative associations) just 'be there' all the time, everywhere, driving a cue wherever possible. Beware that people do not use the cues as auto-pilot triggers to ignore. Examine the psychology of making people remember things and use these markers (see box above, right).

All the cues and so on you are employing work best on brand users, and increasing penetration may require a non-advertising route.

Conclusion

The combined framework described here provides a universal model for communications planning that is actionable for media. It brings together all current thinking and reconciles conflicting views and evidence. For example, it allows us to take on board Heath's thinking, work with

Peripheral cues

Reciprocation

The idea is that a person is somehow obliged to agree with the message.

Consistency/repetition

Means relying on thoughts held in the past. Repetition can induce favourable judgement without stimulating message elaboration by enhancing the perception of familiarity. Familiar tunes or advertising styles.

Social proof

Is akin to peer pressure. Celebrity endorsements are effective cues, yet changes will be slight and short-lived.

Liking

The speaker is likeable. Cute character.

Authority

The speaker is an expert.

Scarcity

The message is only around for a short time and you should listen now!

What makes us remember?

- ▶ People (eg Halifax & Howard)
- ▶ Jingles (eg Intel inside)
- ▶ Music (eg British Airways music)
- ▶ Logos (eg Kellogg's K, Nike Swoosh, Adidas Stripes)
- ▶ Colours (eg First Direct/black, Orange/orange)
- ▶ Design (eg Coke bottle, Toilet Duck bottle neck)
- ▶ Alliteration (eg 118 118)
- ▶ Layout (eg Felix black and white cartoon)

AIDA where relevant, use message learning and work with motivations, moods and other things to do with improving quality of message processing - without any need to invoke neuroscience.

We have found this framework explains most of what we see working or not working for our clients, and it helps us work out what the role of communications and media is, whether it is to persuade with messages, to learn, deliver and amplify a cue or to nudge/prompt action. ■

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