

## **What Your Customers Can't Say**

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by David B. Wolfe

### **Breakthroughs in brain science are challenging basic assumptions about consumer behavior. It's time to re-write the rules of market research.**

If your job depends on market research, prepare for a shock. New discoveries in brain science are radically revising our understanding of how human beings think and make decisions. These new models of cognition are rewriting the conventional wisdom about consumer behavior.

Conventional marketing research depends on the assumption that people can accurately report their values, needs, and motivations. But many scientists no longer believe this. "We have reason to doubt that full awareness of our motives, drives, and other mental activities may be possible," says neurologist Richard Restak. "Our inability to accurately report intentions and expectations may simply reflect the fact that they are not qualitatively conscious," adds Bernard J. Baars, author of *In the Theater of Consciousness*.

The idea that consumers have limited knowledge of their motives is shocking on both a professional and personal level. Everyone wants to believe they know why they do what they do. It wounds one's sense of personal autonomy to think otherwise. Also, evidence that average people cannot accurately describe their motivations is a direct challenge to established methods of conducting research. It calls for radical changes in the status quo of research.

The natural tendency to resist change explains why many otherwise skilled researchers are trying to block out this truth. But it's also true that more accurate research produces better business decisions. That is why cutting-edge researchers are searching for new ways to reveal the subconscious roots of consumer behavior.

### **Behind Marketing's Woes**

In their book, *The Marketing Revolution*, Kevin Clancy and Robert Shulman write, "Marketing is ripe for a revolution because its failures are so apparent. Everybody is angry—stockholders, directors, CEOs, customers—because marketing, which should be driving business, doesn't work." One of the most important reasons for this breakdown is that research is not working because of flaws in its basic premises. Even academics, the primary source of research theory, see major flaws in mainstream research methods.

Multivariate statistics that describe personality traits can account for no more than 7 percent of purchasing behavior, according to a paper published by William Massy, Ronald Frank, and Thomas Lodahl of Stanford, the University of Pennsylvania, and Cornell, respectively.

Consumer research's problems originate in psychology, a field that has long struggled to define human behavior with the same precision physicists use to describe the movement of bodies from atoms to stars. But human behavior is too unpredictable to describe with such precision, because it depends on an almost infinite number of relationships. An increasingly desperate search for cause-and-effect explanations leads many psychologists to "retreat to abstract ideas that ignore contexts completely," writes Harvard psychologist Jerome Kagan.

Consumer research reflects similar tendencies. Kagan is bothered by psychology's excessive dependence on behavioral models that conform better to statistical theory than to behavioral realities. Models of consumer behavior tend to extract their subjects from the complex, often unpredictable, but completely natural contexts in which people live and make purchasing decisions. The result is often an interesting manipulation of a hypothetical situation that leads to a marketing failure.

One of the most famous marketing busts was the reformulation of Coca-Cola. Extensive consumer research predicted success for "New Coke" because people said it tasted better. But the research failed to disclose that people also saw "Old Coke" as an important cultural icon, that would lose value by changing the original recipe. This subtle value proved to be far more influential than taste in determining consumer response.

Kodak's "Advanta" camera was an even costlier bust. Its research failed to warn executives of Advanta's biggest challenge: persuading a marketplace dominated by middle-aged baby boomers to buy what was proudly touted as a high-tech product. In mid-life, the bells and whistles of new technology generally begin to lose their appeal. Simplicity begins to edge out complexity in consumers' preferences.

Mainstream consumer research generally fails to take into account developmental changes in values and world views that happen across a person's life span. Research also tends to ignore the major changes in cognition, or how the mind processes information, that happen with age. The subliminal origins of these changes prevent consumers from adequately reporting them to researchers, but the changes are decisive in marketplace behavior.

Another assumption that leads consumer research astray is borrowed from classic economics. Researchers assume that people make buying decisions to satisfy their self-interest, and that they use reason to determine which product best serves that end. Brain researchers see reason playing a much weaker role in personal decisions, however. In their book *Marketing Revolution*, Clancy and Shulman state the problem this way: "Because consumers don't choose rationally, any research that forces rational answers has to be flawed."

### **Research is Too Rational**

For years marketers have complained that consumers often indicate one thing in research, yet behave differently in the marketplace. But consumers are not pathological liars. They are split personalities, according to University of Iowa neurologist Antonio Damasio. To be more specific, their decisions are split by the functions of reason and emotion.

Damasio's research shows that different brain sites and different mental processes are involved with different kinds of decision-making. We use one set of mental tools when we consider hypothetical matters, and another when we make personal decisions. Emotions are triggered by changes in body states, according to Damasio. For example, when someone makes you angry: your face flushes while your heart pounds and stomach muscles tighten. Bodily functions also change when you see an old friend, enjoy a brilliant sunset, hear moving music, or sit down to an appetizing meal. According to Damasio, these changes in body states are essential to the production of emotions. And without emotions, we cannot make what Damasio calls "personally advantageous decisions."

Emotions tell us how relevant a matter is to our needs. Reason alone cannot do this, says Damasio. Damasio studies people who suffer from a condition that makes them similar to "Star Trek's" Mr. Spock. Brain lesions have wiped out their secondary emotions, which are critical to socially adaptable behavior. Reason is the only tool they have when they need to figure something out. One might think that this kind of brain damage would lead a person to make better decisions. After all, we are taught early in life that the best decisions are usually free of emotional taint. But Damasio's research indicates otherwise.

When presented with hypothetical issues, Damasio's patients experience no unusual difficulties. But when a matter directly involves them, problem-solving becomes difficult. Even deciding what to wear or when to make a doctor's appointment becomes a challenging act of mind.

Reason is qualitatively value free, according to Damasio. It does not operate to make decisions, but to analyze choices, assist in perceiving reality, and construct possibilities. Reason may help you recognize the tree you are looking at in a nursery and determine if it will fit in your garden, but you need emotions to understand the personal benefits that will accrue if you take the tree home. You also need emotion to decide whether or not the price is fair.

Emotions have a powerful effect on our consumer choices, because they push us toward decisions we think are best for us. We often bypass reason when making these decisions because experience endows us with what Damasio calls "somatic markers." Somatic markers are like computer shortcuts that incorporate many keystrokes into one or two. They exist in inherited behavior traits or are formed by experience. They are pre-recorded behavior guides that can be instantly accessed and played back to assist in making new decisions.

They often make reason irrelevant to decision-making. Somatic markers are the most likely biological basis of intuition; they are the equivalent of what marketers call "hot buttons." They also serve as "safety buttons" that produce quick responses when reason operates too slowly to avoid calamity. Somatic markers take control when an errant car suddenly appears in your path, requiring quick action to avoid a collision. Only later, when you begin shaking, are you aware of the emotional buildup it took to quickly avert danger. Preset responses in somatic markers have kept you from serious harm.

Many research questions fail to deeply stimulate consumers' somatic markers or "hot buttons." Instead, they invite respondents to develop a reason-based explanation that often distorts reality. Instead of the real reason for buying or not buying something, researchers get a rationalization based on the respondent's idealized self-image. If they do not account for this bias, researchers are left with a model based on how people think they ought to be motivated, instead of a model based on their actual motivations. Applying these flawed models in the marketplace magnifies their errors. It's like the errant path of a bullet whose course is only a hair's width off at the gun's muzzle, but well wide when it misses its target.

Even at their best, consumers give researchers mere approximations of reality. The human mind lacks the cold unambiguous precision of computers, which is why humans can be creative while computers cannot. Yet consumer research relies heavily on mathematical protocols that originated in the hard sciences. Tools that are designed to describe the black-and-white predictability of matter and energy are unsuited to the more uncertain world of human behavior. Until recently, these flawed tools are almost the only ones businesses have had at their disposal.

### **The Future Direction of Research**

Brain science has come so far that researchers are now able to routinely eavesdrop on brains while they think. This gives scientists the ability to create more accurate models of how the mind/brain complex receives and processes information. Their work indicates that current market research methods tend to follow a backwards course. Market research is primarily focused on the workings of the conscious mind; it gives scant attention to the unconscious mind, and pays no attention on the brain. The reverse should be the rule.

Most of a marketer's message is processed outside a consumer's conscious mind. That is

because the conscious mind is not capable of handling all the information the senses pick up. Our conscious mind only knows the things our brain and unconscious mind select for us to think about and take action on. Thus, when consumers talk to researchers about themselves, researchers are getting a much edited picture of the consumers' motivations and behavior.

Future research models will be based more faithfully on how consumers' decisions are really made. These models will reflect developmental changes in needs, motivations, and behavior that happen across the lifespan, thus decreasing researchers' dependence on consumers' self-reports. Additionally, these models will incorporate new discoveries about how we perceive, think about, and make decisions on matters.

Only then will research experience major improvement in uncovering consumers' root motivations. Root motivations—the key to knowing how to press consumers' hot buttons—are innate behavioral dispositions, or personality at its most basic level. They give little direct evidence of their presence, even as they cue our behavior like offstage prompters. It is not the job of the conscious mind to originate motivations. Its job is more executive in nature. Brain scientists sometimes refer to the conscious mind as an "executive officer" who makes decisions based on information brought to it from the subliminal regions of the complex. In this subliminal world are the origins of values, needs, and motivations.

The new insights we are gaining about the human brain and mind are astonishing. They are setting the stage for major changes in the way consumer research is conducted. Now that we are finding out why people cannot tell the whole truth about themselves, we have good reasons to start making these changes.

### **Taking It Further**

Overviews of recent advances in brain research can be found in Richard Restak's most recent book, *Brainscapes: An Introduction to What Neuroscience Has Learned About the Structure, Function, and Abilities of the Brain* (1996), published by Hyperion; Bernard J. Baar's *In the Theater of Consciousness* (1997), published by Oxford University Press; and Antonio Damasio's *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (1994), published by Avon Books. The crisis in marketing is described in *Marketing Revolution: A Radical Manifesto for Dominating the Marketplace* by Kevin J. Clancy and Robert S. Shulman (1993), published by Harperbusiness.

### **About the author**

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