

Brands in the brain

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It is often said that brands are owned by consumers, but more specifically they belong to our brains. As our understanding of neuroscience rapidly expands, we now know more than ever about how people remember, relate and respond to brands. And this understanding needs to have fundamental implications for the way we develop communication strategies and evaluate their effectiveness.

How we make decisions

The task of running our day-to-day lives is mostly delegated to our intuitive, unconscious self. We make decisions as efficiently and rapidly as possible using fast and frugal heuristics. Heuristics are the brain's shortcuts, the simple rules of thumb that we use every day to approximate the best course of action and avoid considering options in any more detail than is necessary. This is not to say that our rational, deep-thinking mental resources have nothing to do with the way we respond to brands and make decisions. Many of the heuristics that we follow have been formed consciously, at some point in our past, and they often reflect our deep rooted attitudes and the way they see the world. However, once we are armed with these rapidly applicable rules of thumb, we don't have to think deeper in making day to-day decisions. This applies to most of the decisions we make about brands and is the reasons behind our choice often to purchase the same brand repeatedly, provided this choice continues to yield the same results.

Creating and reinforcing brand memories

The heuristics that we use to make decisions are shaped and reinforced by memories, which take the form of networks of neurons within our brain that 'fire' together to recall experiences and bring associations to mind. The stronger these neural connections are, the more rapidly and repeatedly they fire up when we encounter a relevant trigger.

The strongest memory structures within the brain are 'affective memories', which are aligned with deep personal feelings and motivations. When brands are able to form and consolidate such memories, they become powerful influences on our behaviour.

Creating potent brand memories is therefore key to success. In fact, studies show that these memories are powerful enough to influence our actual experience of brands, not just our attitudes towards them.

All forms of brand exposure have the potential to create and reinforce brand memories. In addition to paid activity, the experiences of others also help to form stronger affective patterns, attaching considerable value to word-of-mouth and endorsement. But the most powerful force for creating neural connections is personal experience.

Updating the brand narrative

When our memories are contradicted by present experience, our brains may respond by updating or reshaping them. When the unexpected experience is negative or contradictory to the brand narrative, this represents a potential threat. However, marketers can also use the updating process to freshen, strengthen and evolve their brand memories. Balancing novelty and consistency in brand messaging is the most effective means of staying in control of the brand narrative in this way. Novelty alerts our brain to the possibility of connecting up our memories differently; aligning with our existing affective memory structures through consistency helps to convince the brain that this particular brand memory is important enough to invest in updating.

In today's complex media environment, where cutting through the clutter and getting noticed is in itself a challenge, the

balance of novelty and consistency is also one of the most effective strategies for capturing and holding attention.

Capturing and holding attention

Attention exists because the brain needs a means of focusing its finite resources and ensuring that we capture, process and encode the information that is most important to our survival and success. The brain is constantly and swiftly selecting the things that we will pay closer attention to at the expense of others. In general, these things have a greater likelihood of engaging our attention if they surprise us, if they generate an emotional reaction, or if they align with our existing motivations, priorities and sense of self.

The brain in context

Being noticed is an essential starting point for any brand communication. However, our expanding understanding of the human brain makes it increasingly clear that marketers must do more with human attention once they have captured it. They must seek to build strong brand memories and effective brand narratives that can influence consumer choices, while also working on understanding how those memories will interact with our brain's heuristics. However, an equally important conclusion of the latest neuroscience is that it is not only the structures within our brains that determine our actions, but the way these systems, memories and heuristics interact with the contexts we encounter. A complete marketing strategy takes account of these contexts as well.

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