



B E N N E T T K U H N V A R N E R

The Brand and the Brain.

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Recently, a team at the Baylor College of Medicine studied the brain scans of 67 people who were asked to do blind taste tests of Coca-Cola and Pepsi. Participants were split virtually 50/50 over which soft drink tasted better. But when the same people were tested again and told which brand of soft drink they were drinking, 75% said they preferred Coke.

Coke vs. Pepsi

Why did the test subjects change their opinion? Why would they be split 50/50 in blind taste tests, but prefer Coca-Cola three to one in the non-blind test? Because two different parts of the brain control taste preference and brand preference. During blind taste tests, something called the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex lights up, which helps drive sensory preferences such as taste. But when consumers know which brand they're drinking, the medial prefrontal cortex lights up, which helps drive *brand* preference.

In other words, because of Coke's brand imagery, about 75% of the population thinks they prefer Coke over Pepsi even though blind taste tests show that only about 50% do.

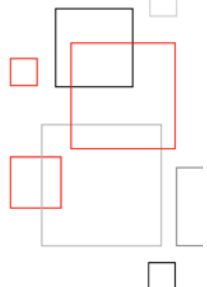
This is not entirely surprising. If you ask consumers what images pop into their heads when they think of Coca-Cola, they're likely to say Polar Bears, Santa Clause, Mean Joe Green and a whole slew of other warmly-embraced American icons. If you ask the same consumers about Pepsi, the imagery isn't quite as deeply-rooted – they might indicate they link Pepsi to a pop star, but they won't link Pepsi to the kind of emotional American icons Coke has linked itself to.

Implications for marketers

As you might imagine, this study has powerful implications for Coke, Pepsi and anyone else interested in selling more product. This budding field is called Neuromarketing and it relies on a brain-scanning device called Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging, or fMRI. Scientists have used fMRIs to track which regions of the brain light up when people recognize a face, hear a song, make a decision, pay attention or sense deception.

Neuromarketing is currently the domain of larger corporations with significant marketing research budgets. But traditional forms of research have shown that the more emotionally charged a commercial is, the more likely the message is to be imbedded in a consumer's mind. That's because in order for a long-term memory to be created, it must first have an emotional component to it. (This explains why most people recall the Taco Bell Chihuahua or the Energizer Bunny -- both of which tickled our emotional funny bones -- but can't recall the last Tylenol commercial they saw.)

direct thinking.



Criticism of Neuromarketing

For all its positive potential, Neuromarketing has its critics. An organization called Commercial Alert has called it “Orwellian” and has sent a letter to the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation asking for an investigation into Neuromarketing. The group’s executive director asked for the investigation because he believed marketers could “trigger neural activity so as to modify behavior.” But Dr. Steven Quartz, a neuroscientist at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, CA disputes such a claim. He points out that, “It’s pure fantasy to suppose that Neuromarketing is about embedding subliminal messages.”

How is Neuromarketing currently being used?

For those with the research budgets to support Neuromarketing, it can be a powerful tool. In Hollywood, movie trailers are now being tested using the fMRI method. Producers have found that a trailer’s success is directly related to whether it engages people on an emotional level. DaimlerChrysler took fMRIs of men’s brains as they looked at different images of cars. Not surprisingly, the sexy, racy sports cars activated the men’s reward centers.

At Harvard, researchers found that in young heterosexual men, their brains were highly activated by beautiful female faces. (Which begs the question, “Did they really have to spend money to figure that out?”) And Dr. Gregory Berns of Emory University in Atlanta is studying how people’s opinions are swayed by others. The research could shed light on products that become fads.

Implications for marketers.

While fMRI technology is currently out of reach of most marketers, these studies do validate a process that BKV, one of the largest direct response agencies in the country, has practiced for some time. The process involves using consumer insights to drive quantifiable, testable marketing results.

While this process doesn’t use fMRI technology, it does use highly sophisticated direct response modeling in addition to a combination of inventive strategies, novel insights and good, old-fashioned hard work.

In one instance, BKV used this process to test three distinct offers in a campaign targeting business owners. One offer guaranteed a free duffel bag in return for meeting with a sales representative. Another offer guaranteed \$100 in return for meeting with a sales representative. But the winning offer, developed by using BKV’s process, generated more than four times the results of the other two offers. And, amazingly enough, the winning message didn’t require the client to give away any premium (such as the duffel bag or the \$100). It simply reflected extraordinary consumer insight in the messaging we developed.

About BKV:

BKV is one of the largest independent marketing communications firms in the country. For more than 25 years, we’ve been helping clients like Six Flags, Cingular Wireless, The Home Depot and Black & Decker develop response-oriented marketing campaigns that generate results.

If you’re interested in finding out how BKV can generate quantifiable results for you and your company, [give us a call at 404-233-0332](tel:404-233-0332). We’ll be glad to put our expertise to work for you.