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RESEARCH WORLD

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Unlocking consumers' hearts and minds

Diving into people's feelings is not new for market research and qualitative studies have always centred on decoding consumers' innermost thoughts and desires. What is new is the combination of new and established methods in finding the key to researching emotions. By Thomas Schindlbeck

Neuromarketing continues to attract a lot of attention but beyond the hype it also provoked interest in measuring human emotions and thinking about how we can integrate this knowledge into the marketing mix. Cognitive neuroscience often uses traditional psycho-analytical language like 'subconscious' to explain its experimental findings which are mainly based on fMRI neuro-imaging. However, fascinating as it is to look at this visualisation of neural activities, it is doubtful that it can be used to design the brands of the future as some optimistic marketers had hoped. Interpreting fMRI signals continues to be a challenge, and the fact that specific patterns of neural activity are evident when a consumer is exposed to their favourite brands hardly adds insight to our market research methodologies.

The neuroscience based claim that all behaviour is emotional and emotions are highly subconscious has however stimulated renewed interest in established verbal questioning techniques developed in psychological research. Classic approaches, such as projective techniques transferring a brand or an advertising campaign into a planet, a world of its own made up of images, scenes and feelings, or a person with a certain look, style and character, are still valid approaches to pave the way to subconscious emotions.

A more structured way to the unconscious, developed straight from psychotherapy, is to combine non-symbolic and symbolic imagery through image focusing. The first step concentrates on non-symbolic images evoked by a stimulus, after which respondents are asked to associate feelings linked with these images. These feelings are then expressed through visual symbols generating an 'emotional universe' which can, for example, help in analysing the emotional positioning of a brand or key emotional messages

of an advertising campaign or packaging design. Other approaches derived from psychotherapeutic techniques are based on Jacob Moreno's Psychodrama acting out family roles and Fritz Perls' Gestalt therapy.

Emotional intelligence

Recent scientific findings lead to more precise and structured ways of data analysis including new systems to categorise verbally expressed emotions and connect them to neural activities such as stimulation, dominance and balance. The LIMBIC CUBE™ developed by the Swiss researcher Prof. Marco Casanova is one example.



Some say that any attempt to minimise analytical categories produces banal findings and that differentiated structures such as the seven core emotions developed by psychologist Paul Ekman are much more illuminating. Other approaches use various Emotional Intelligence factors to define the emotional competences of a brand or communication concept. Qualitative research is used to optimise and standardise indicators of emotional positioning dimensions in quantitative research. For example, different measures of Emotional Intelligence were integrated into the annual 'Typology of Wishes' created by publishing house Burda, which is based on almost 20,000 interviews that helped to identify emotional competence structures within different consumer groups.

Interactive

The rise of online research as a cheaper option to validate qualitative findings will lead to new challenges in adapting techniques to the interactive world. The visual generation of mind maps based on association and tagging such as the Dialego 'Mind Voyager' opens up new possibilities of semantic analysis based on large sample sizes. We see various efforts to develop approaches that take account of people's limitations in articulating their emotions. Non-verbal methods have a long tradition in market research and are based on the assumption that visual symbols which avoid verbal rationalisation are more valid expressions of the unconscious.

Non-verbal scales are often based on facial expressions and body language corresponding with universal emotions, such as Brainjuicer Labs' FaceTrace™, IPSOS' Emoti* Scape™ and ID-studiolab's PrEMO which consists of 14 animations of cartoon characters presented on a computer interface. Other approaches are based on the visualisation of metaphors, such as Conquest Research's Metaphorix™ or on validated mood boards like H,T,P, Concept's Brand

E-motion, a set of visual collages expressing a range of emotions used in both qualitative and quantitative settings.

Storytelling

Every picture tells a story and this leads to further fusions of verbal and non-verbal techniques under the storytelling umbrella. Cognitive neuroscience tests indicate that anchoring emotional content in the human memory strongly benefits from storytelling patterns, an important aspect in creating 'love brands' and positively memorised advertising. Storytelling methods often use respondent-generated or prompted pictures to help consumers tell a story of a brand, a packaging design or an advertising stimulus.

The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) encourages respondents to collect pictures that correspond with a specific research topic and to weave a story around those pictures. Anderson Analytics uses cartoon pictures as a stimulus toolbox to generate stories whilst the Wood Holmes Group applies storytelling techniques as a new focus group approach which concentrates on listening to respondents telling stories about the research topic.

Building on the high affinity of storytelling, visual expression and emotions, H,T,P, Concept has combined Brand E-motion with a web-based blogging tool which can be individualised through verbal stories as well as collages built from the Brand E-motion picture pool and through video uploads. 'Brain Epics' enables consumers to express their emotions and feelings about a topic through state-of-the-art multimedia tools motivating participants to tell stories in a playful, multi-faceted way.

Hi-Tech

What about other hi-tech tools? Whilst measuring neural activities during a shopping excursion still requires some wiring which puts the respondent in an unreal situation, other methods like eye tracking have overcome the technological obstacles that used to hinder the measurement process. In documenting eye movements or intensities of emotions through applications such as turning wheels of pads reacting to pressure, there is a trend of combining technological applications with narrative techniques to gain a better understanding of data. The respondents' role switches from research object to research partner to help explain behavioural and emotional patterns.

This might signal where the measurement of emotions is heading. As fascinating as new web or hi-tech based tools might be, we researchers are still dealing with human beings. The recent renaissance of ethnographic research benefiting from video documentation and integration of web-based, blogging-inspired data collection is just one indicator that listening, observing and empathy are more valid than ever. And it is unlikely that these qualities will be replaced by technical and computer generated analysis any time soon – at least as long we are still talking about the hearts and minds of the consumer.

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