



Imagination Report

We are working on a study to assess, in part, response to billboard advertising. That would seem easier than other kinds of copy testing as billboards (OOH, or Out of Home ads to the purist) are usually less complex than print or audio media. They display nicely on a computer screen for online interviewing. There's just one catch. Real consumers don't study billboards. Exposure is often for only a few seconds. How can we replicate that in a research setting and in an efficient manner?

Wanting a surrogate for driving large samples of people past billboards and then interviewing them, we applied our imagination. We figured out how to automatically close the web page showing the billboard after so many seconds and return to the questionnaire. The programming script is nothing new—except the idea of applying it to get a more realistic exposure to the ad in question.

Travel Alert

Paul Riedesel will be out of the country on vacation during the first two weeks of April. We will do all we can to manage projects around this "hole", but he will be offline and unavailable.

If you have something pending that you may want to get going with us in the next few weeks, please call now. If something comes up during early April, feel free to send it and we will see it eventually, but simply cannot respond until later. Your understanding is appreciated.

"Strangers to Ourselves"

This is an intriguing book by psychologist Timothy Wilson we highly recommend. While he does not directly address issues in marketing, the implications of this very readable work for marketing research are substantial.

Wilson's focus is on what he calls the adaptive unconscious. The unconscious itself is defined as "mental processes that are inaccessible to consciousness but that influence judgments, feelings, or behavior." Even though we are not and cannot be aware of what is going on, our unconscious is capable of learning. It filters the environment and governs what even reaches consciousness. Much of what we feel and much of what our bodies do is the result of these unconscious processes.

That we cannot ever "know" these processes directly may be unsettling, but that is why we are literally "strangers to ourselves" (read the book for extensive examples). Nevertheless the prevailing model of behavior assumes that we can consciously decide what we do—and should. With a little effort, it is assumed that we can account for our actions and feelings. But can we?

The author uses the wonderful concept of *confabulation* which the Wikipedia defines as ". . . the confusion of imagination with memory, and/or the confusion of true memories with false memories." We all do it. We profess to give sincere accounts for our actions that seem perfectly plausible, but which can be shown to be impossible or affected by past experiences of which we have no conscious memory.

(continued)

(Strangers to Ourselves, continued)

Many of our research habits assume a rational model of behavior. Don't we presume that consumers can tell us why they bought one thing and not another? That they can tell us what is more important to them, and what is less important? That they can accurately report which brands they have heard advertising for?

We are not proposing to blow up consumer research as we know it. The data gathered by asking questions are still data and potentially useful. We just have to recognize that memories and stated opinions are only a partial guide to what lies inside the consumer's mind. We have never put much credence in direct questions such as "Why did you do that?" The old saw goes "Ask a question, get an answer", but that doesn't guarantee the answer will mean much.

What we try to do in surveys is frame questions that don't encourage consumers to make up answers. We don't ask them to account for processes that likely had largely unconscious components they could not possibly be aware of. We do ask how they feel. That alone can tell us a great deal.

Bad News About Your Competition

. . . is not necessarily good news for your brand. A study reported in the *Journal of Advertising Research* found that bad publicity about one brand transfers to other brands in the category. Those that are most distant from the troubled brand may benefit, but be careful of *Schadenfreude*.

Is this logical? No, but it is further evidence of the non-conscious processes that shape us. The brain does not have tidy, insulated pigeon holes for each brand. Instead, memories are constantly being reorganized and re-combined. Bad news about one product spills over into others in the category. If you are threatened by another's crisis, your communications need to work hard at creating psychological distance from the affected brand.

Now We Know Why

It's hardly news that consumers spend more freely with credit cards than with cash. Recent neurological research helps to explain why. One part of our brains is activated when we take in something we feel will be rewarding—be it food, status, a new toy, or other pleasure. A different part of the brain processes expectations of pain (such as having to pay for something). And the more immediate the expectation is, the stronger the brain activity.

The medial prefrontal cortex balances these two as assumed by classical economics. But there is a catch. It is the immediate expectation of pain that weighs in, not the longer-term "rational" costs. Since our brains are wired to feel less pain from deferred payments, the "go for it" impulse is more likely to triumph. Rational calculations may still prevail, but as organisms we evolved in a context of direct bartering rather than abstract credit.

Logoland

We were amused to discover several years ago that our professionally-designed logo bears a resemblance to that of the German national unemployment service, the *Arbeitsamt*.



Ours



Theirs

Some might find this disturbing, but we got a smile out of it. The business has kept us off the streets for lo these many years, and we can't complain.

Hot Topic

If you have done some work with us lately focused on Baby Boomers and their (our) approach to retirement, let's just say you aren't alone. We don't recall a comparable explosion of interest in one general subject that came on so quickly. If nothing else we are fast becoming experts in spite of ourselves.