



Imagination Report

We have begun an initiative to bring some sense to the suddenly-hot topic of Baby Boomer marketing. The volume of advertising aimed explicitly at this generation has exploded in the past couple of years. Financial planning services are at the forefront, but many other enterprises are trying to tailor their offerings to the 70+MM Boomers.

While some of these efforts are intelligent, we are dismayed by the reliance on narrow stereotypes. We are fond of pointing out that 99.4 percent of us did not go to Woodstock. Three million did spend time in Vietnam. Only a minority of us are college graduates (much less being psychology majors from Berkeley).



What we are planning is a cultural segmentation that will more faithfully represent the diversity within the Baby Boom generation. The results will be relevant to anyone seeking to connect with them. Our study will not be limited to specific product categories, but we welcome any input or suggestions you may have.

Broadband Keeps Growing

A Dallas consulting firm, Parks Associates, estimates that 46% of U.S. households had broadband Internet access as of last year, and that this will grow to 55% in 2007. While we lag some other countries such as South Korea, this trend is important to most marketers and to those of us who rely on Internet-based research panels.

Chances Are . . .

. . . you would enjoy the book by this title with the subtitle "Adventures in Probability." Authors Michael and Ellen Kaplan walk the reader through the history and applications of probability with a minimum of math. We take statistical thinking for granted, but there was a time it was considered to be heretical (as was the practice of property insurance). Today we know that randomness, uncertainty and chaos characterize physical systems—not to mention social or market systems.

We can all do our work more wisely if we understand something of game theory, something of Bayesian statistics, and something of the hazards of trying to predict rare events. Our clients are better served, for instance, not by single point-estimates of (say) new product sales, but by the probabilities over a range of outcomes. Such wisdom is not the sole province of math geeks. Any effective marketing professional can and should be able to use it.

On Subliminal Advertising

Marketing News columnist Don Schulz reported in March that the supposedly debunked (and now banned) practice of subliminal advertising may actually be effective.

Academic research and neuroscience now hold that the brain could very well absorb subliminal cues ("buy Ipana") even though we are not consciously aware of them. As one scholar noted "Those memories that lie beyond recall may be just as powerful in influencing the way we feel toward advertising."

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Subliminal Advertising (continued)

No one is arguing loudly for the return of subliminal advertising, but these findings are another reminder of the obsolescence of the "rational" model of consumer decision making that permeates our textbooks and practices. The brain is not an MIT-designed (though spongy) computer. Non-conscious processes are immensely important, and emotion is not just a pesky impediment to reason but a strong force to be reckoned with. And many things that we don't even know we "know" influence our behavior as consumers. Now where can we buy Ipana these days?

Measuring Attribute Importance

Kevin Clancy and Samuel Rabino take up some perennial measurement issues in the March *Journal of Advertising Research*. They focus on consumers' direct evaluation of the importance of different product attributes, something we deal with all the time. To their credit (to begin with), they phrased the question to consumers in terms of "desirability" rather than "importance." The latter practice rates high on can-of-wormness.

One hypothesis they explored was the supposition that ratings would be higher if the attributes were not strictly verbal but also included visual enhancements. Rejected. This was a surprise to the authors, though of some relief. We too worry that communication within surveys relies heavily on purely verbal/textual cues. There may well be exceptions, but this suggests that current practice is not so unreliable.

In three different product categories, the authors also found that tangible attributes ("imported from England") were rated better than intangible ones ("preferred by professional women"). This is not a novel finding. It does not mean that brands should only be positioned on tangible benefits or attributes. We know better than that. Rather, we and our clients need to realize when we are mixing the proverbial apples and oranges. Good judgment is always in order.

Personnel Notes

One of our founding partners, Mary Mahon, left to pursue other opportunities last year. We are very pleased to share the news that Mary has recently taken a position with General Mills.

While we have benefited from many professional friendships over the years, a few stand out for their early and steadfast support. One of them is Rob White. After a splendiferous and award-filled tenure at Fallon, Rob and some colleagues have begun a new venture known as Zeus Jones. We wish them the best—and expect nothing less.

On Archetypes

Most are familiar with segmentation analysis in which consumers are assigned to discrete segments with catchy names. This procedure can be very useful managerially, but the very people it is meant to describe are likely to observe "I don't fit any one of those", or "I'm a mixture of several of those." Shouldn't this make us a little nervous?

Some years ago we began speaking up for an alternative means of representing consumer diversity. Instead of forcing everyone into a single segment, it explicitly represents individuals as mixtures of several ideal types or archetypes. If nothing else, the archetypal approach has more face validity with consumers.

The archetypes may still be compared systematically in terms of the attitudes, behavior or characteristics associated with them. Marketing communications may be still be tailored to speak to one of more of them. It can still be said that Archetype X represents 30% of the marketplace—it's just that the reference is not simply to 30% of consumers.

A seldom-read page on our web site discusses the particulars of doing archetypal analysis. We would love to see a few more visitors:

<http://www.action-research.com/archtype.html>