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Research News: Opinion

Applying science to innovate the measurement of persuasion

The role of behavioural economics in creating effective brand communications

Advertisers have always intuitively understood the power of emotive appeals to connect with their audiences, however advertising research has been notoriously poor at evaluating consumer response along this emotive dimension. Marketers have long been frustrated with this disconnect yet there has been little genuine innovation beyond existing approaches for determining what messages are working hardest to create (or reinforce) brand memories and drive long term loyalty. That is, until now, writes Ryan France.

Memory makes us. Its primary role is to help us make decisions, and in the complex world of brand and communications understanding the function of memory to measure the potential of an ad is crucial to the integration of a brand into a person's long-term mindset. In fact memories can influence the success of brands. We plan future behaviours by relating the present to memories, past experiences and learned associations. Brand memories are essential to decision-making, supporting the quick valuations that our brains calculate when we are making a choice. Moreover, memories are dynamic, meaning they can be formed and re-consolidated by new information, including advertising.

Understanding the role of memory has big implications and provides new opportunities for brands. By using advertising to update or refresh brand memories, marketers are able to influence and change the narrative around their brand in a way that reinforces existing or new relationships – therefore a brand that understands how to influence memories will have a competitive advantage in the market.

This is not just theory. In 2012, the UK Institute of Practitioners in Advertising collected campaign information and corresponding business results over a decade and found that communications focused on emotional brand-building campaigns had a superior impact on business results in the long-term compared to communications focused on short-term gains, such as price cuts or sales.

They also identified that advertising that had been tested using traditional market research measures actually performed more poorly in delivering a sales uplift six months following a campaign than ads that had coasted through untested by market research.

This should be ringing alarm bells for the research industry and it is no wonder we often find ad agencies being ever so slightly antagonistic towards ad testing – the market researcher being cast as a calculator that says 'does not compute' rather than as a valuable partner to help prevent failure and maximise success. This can marginalise insights departments in strategic conversations, and reduce ad testing to a tick-box step that adds little value to the complex challenge of creating advertising that delivers returns greater than the investment. In a better world those tasked with creating ads should be craving (not

dreading) research insights – it is clear that as an industry we are way overdue for a genuinely new approach to ad testing.

The enormous developments in behavioural economics, heuristic thinking and neuroscience constantly inform and teach us new things about the ways in which people respond to stimuli and how it affects their relationships. At TNS we have taken an innovative approach to apply this science to the relationship between brands and communications, and it is fast changing the way we think and how we collect and interrogate our research data.

The key is to firstly make the distinction between short-term and long-term outcomes. Traditional ad testing (focusing on persuasion as measured by involvement in the ad or a stated intent to change behaviour) is well correlated with short-term behaviour change, but the challenge is that advertising objectives are often about brand building, which is a long-term enterprise.

Sometimes the goal of an ad may be to get people to the shop tomorrow to take advantage of a discount deal, but very often consumers aren't making purchase decisions whilst in front of the TV. More often they are simply chilling out, and therefore the benefit of advertising is not to influence immediate behaviour but rather embed a brand more deeply in a consumer's mind.

Connecting the brand to consistent and relevant themes such as 'refreshment', 'style' or 'caring' often does this, so that when consumers do find themselves in a purchase situation, brand becomes an influential factor in the decision about which of the available alternatives to choose.

At TNS we are now applying behavioural economics to develop a new framework for determining which advertising messages are working hardest to create or reinforce brand memories that can endure long enough to influence behaviours over months and years.

Behavioural economists have long examined the way people use the two parts of their brain through 'System 1' and 'System 2'. A large portion of decision making rests with System 1, the fast thinking unconscious part of the brain that handles day to day tasks without deep deliberation, and the part of the brain that advertising needs to penetrate in order to create brands that influence long-term behaviour.

System 2 is reserved for slow, resource-heavy rational thought. Behavioural economics provides the science behind the art of persuasion with concepts that advertisers have intuitively always understood. Three of these concepts are central to our new approach to ad testing at TNS.

Firstly, novelty gets attention because stimulus that falls outside expectations signals to the System 1 brain that there is something new to be learned that it doesn't already know from past experience.

Secondly, emotional appeals work because of the huge volume of stimuli System 1 is absorbing, it chooses to direct conscious attention to those things that it deeply cares about it.

And thirdly, to secure affective memories messages need to be relevant (ever notice that when you are in the market for an SUV suddenly SUVs you never noticed before seem to be all over the road?).

If you measure these three dimensions in advertising evaluation you will receive a more rounded perspective on the impact of an ad creative, and more nuanced advice on how to maximise that impact can be provided.

The cut-through that every marketer wants, particularly in the digital age, will come from unlocking the brain's inner workings to create campaigns geared to achieve novelty, affect and relevancy. By applying the lessons of behavioural economics and neuroscience to our research instruments, we can now measure these areas and deliver insights that will help guide meaningful marketing spend.

We have long been hearing from clients that the methods of advertising evaluation can be the worst cases of a 'tail wagging the dog'. Ad agencies are forced to put common sense to one side to create advertising that can get past the scrutiny of the rational (System 2) response picked up in traditional research methods, rather than focus on the task of creating truly compelling advertising that cuts through to System 1 - where brands have the power to influence long-term behaviour.

The simple approaches we are now introducing help overcome this.

The first client we partnered with on our campaign to fix ad testing found that the distinction between short-term and long-term responses was simple to understand, and importantly has given them and their agency a real direction on what is and is not working. It showed that across four separate campaigns they nailed different elements and failed at others in their goal to more effectively penetrate the System 1 mind. Finally having sight of this created a great learning platform to help them make better ads. This takes ad testing beyond the role of gatekeeper (which only lets through ideas that its System 2 mind can comprehend) to a more holistic understanding of what appeals to their customers, providing their ad agency with insights and not just test scores to inform future creative.

Behavioural economics provides the science behind the art of persuasion within a construct that advertisers have intuitively always understood. By applying this science to communications, brands can update consumers' memories in a way that more firmly embeds them in their mind and delivers a long-term business return.

We've found resonance amongst clients globally in using behavioural economics in this manner – helping them figure out how to make better and more meaningful advertising...not just measuring it.

Ryan France, brand and communications insights national director, TNS Australia