

A peek inside buyers' heads

Neuroimaging gets lowdown on how ads work — or don't

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By Seth Brown

Picture a mad scientist in his laboratory, cackling with glee as he tries to unlock the secrets of the human mind. Now, consider the unsettling possibility that the scientist may be on to something.

Marketing expert Martin Lindstrom is that scientist, caught up in the excitement of research in his new book, *Buyology*. Lindstrom first became aware of neurological marketing research through a *Forbes* magazine article, "In Search of the Buy Button."

The article discussed a lab in England, where a neuroscientist teamed with a market researcher to scan the brainwaves of subjects watching commercials. Lindstrom was thrilled that unbiased access to the consumer brain was finally available.

A difficulty of standard marketing research, Lindstrom says, is that people will not — or cannot — provide accurate information about their mental states.

When asked why they prefer a brand of soft drink, or how a warning label affects them, most people cannot give a straight answer. This, Lindstrom says, is the great advantage of brain waves.

"They don't waver, hold back, equivocate, cave in to peer pressure, conceal their vanity, or say what they think the person across the table wants to hear. ... Neuroimaging could uncover truths that a half-century of market research, focus groups and opinion polling couldn't come close to accomplishing."

Two technologies were used in Lindstrom's studies: SST (Steady State Topography) and fMRI (functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging). In a series of tests spanning three years and more than 2,000 subjects, he concluded:

- ▶ Warning labels on cigarettes don't work. They stimulate activity in the part of a smoker's brain linked to cravings.

- ▶ Traditional advertisements no longer create lasting impressions. By age 66, most people with a TV will have seen

nearly 2 million commercials. That makes it hard for an ad to increase a viewer's memory of a brand, despite the millions spent.

- ▶ Product placement only works when fully integrated. It works when Coke-bottle-shaped furniture is part of the set design on *American Idol*, for example, or when Reese's Pieces candy was used for bait in the movie *E.T.* However, when a product is not integrated, such as FedEx packages appearing in the background of *Casino Royale*, there is no measurable effect with regard to viewer recollection of brand.

- ▶ Successful branding functions like religion. Simple rituals, such as putting a lime wedge in a Corona or slowly pouring a Guinness, give the brand added cachet. Brands attract zealous followers — "I'm a Mac; I'm a PC." Scans using fMRI technology showed that some viewers had the same neurological response to strong brands that they did to religious iconography.

- ▶ Subliminal advertising can be highly effective. When watching an advertisement, viewers automatically raise their guard against its message. With subliminal advertisements, viewers' guards are down, so their responses are more direct.

- ▶ Marketing isn't restricted to the visual. Many companies use smells to sell products. Fast-food restaurants and supermarket bakeries use artificial fresh-cooked food smells. Sounds also affect buying. A study showed shoppers purchased French or German wine depending on which nationality's music was playing on store speakers.

Lindstrom's research should be of interest to any company launching a new product or brand. "Eight out of 10 products launched in the United States are destined to fail," Lindstrom writes. "Roughly 21,000 new brands are introduced worldwide per year, yet history tells us that more than 90% of them are gone from the shelf a year later."

It's likely that the information in this book will be used in future marketing campaigns, so even if you aren't in the marketing business, it's a worthwhile read as a measure of self-awareness and self-defense.



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Assessment Questions

1. What point does the author of the article make in the first paragraph?
 - A. Fiction can become fact.
 - B. Scientists are mad.
 - C. No one will ever unlock the secrets of the human mind.
 - D. Scientific discoveries happen every day.
2. What could be another title for the book, *Buyology*?
 - A. *The Ethics of Marketing*
 - B. *The Secrets of Neurological Marketing*
 - C. *Ads That Grab*
 - D. *The Marketing Mindset*
3. Why does the author make a comparison between successful branding and religion?
 - A. To show that both rely on a text to guide people to act in certain ways.
 - B. To show that both produce a similar effect in people's minds.
 - C. To show that both use pictures to get their message across.
 - D. To show that both are part of most Americans' lives.
4. In paragraph six, the author implies that one reason people answer untruthfully about new products in polls and focus groups is
 - A. they say what they think the marketer wants to hear.
 - B. they don't understand what they are supposed to do.
 - C. they fear criticism by family members if they tell their true feelings.
 - D. they simply don't care enough about the product to tell the truth.
5. If you were a marketer who was introducing a new product to consumers, what would be the most effective way for you to use the information in this article?
 - A. I would target my advertisements to people under 65.
 - B. I would test my product on 2,000 subjects.
 - C. I would investigate subliminal marketing and integrated product placement.
 - D. I would play music in the background of my TV and radio ads.
6. Which statement best summarizes the message of the article?
 - A. Neuroimaging is a new and highly effective marketing tool.
 - B. Marketers will be using unethical techniques to target consumers in future ad campaigns.
 - C. Consumers simply do not pay attention to advertising anymore.
 - D. If businesses do not change their advertising techniques, they will fail.