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An advertisement for HD-PRIME, America's Cable Neighborhood, by SES AMERICOM. The ad features the text "THE LEADING HDTV CABLE NEIGHBORHOOD." in large, bold, black letters. To the right is the HD-PRIME logo, which includes the text "HD-PRIME™" and "AMERICA'S CABLE NEIGHBORHOOD" in white on a blue background. Below the logo is the SES AMERICOM logo. In the bottom right corner, there is an orange button that says "Click for more".

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Debunking Left/Right Brain Dogma

Theory of Integrated Thought Process Holds Valuable Lessons for Campaigns

By Mark Dominiak

Special to *TelevisionWeek*

Story continues below...

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Back in the Jan. 10, 2005, issue of *TelevisionWeek*, I wrote an article called "Managing the Multimedia Message." In the piece, I pointedly talked about the left brain versus right brain cognitive process, which I believe is a very important topic to understand for those of us in the marketing profession.

On the Wrong Track

In some recent work for clients and for the learning experience, I became versed on the subject of how the human brain processes stimuli and experiences feelings. In short, I learned that the notion of a left brain/right brain philosophy of cognitive brain process was, technically, wrong.

It seems the ultimate implication of where the left brain/right brain philosophy takes us is correct. Namely, a holistic cognitive brain process using both rational and emotional elements helps our minds process environmental stimuli. The process just isn't as clean as some parts occurring in the right hemisphere and some in the left.

Real knowledge about what goes on in the black box we know as the consumer's mind has some worthwhile implications for media planning.

Inside the Black Box

The following information is very condensed and comes from a couple of sources, namely, the impeccable works of Antonio Damasio, the M.W. Van Allen Distinguished Professor and head of the Department of Neurology at the University of Iowa College of Medicine. His published works are best-sellers, including two I recently absorbed, "Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain" and "The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness."

Here's a marketer's brief interpretation of key points from Damasio's material: Rational human thought process seems to be founded on the older brain core regions responsible for biological regulation-not just building from those regions, but interacting with them.

Neural systems from evolutionarily newer parts of the brain, such as those involved in language or visual imagery, engage with the older brain regions in the processing of "objects" (images, language, concepts, experiences, feelings, etc.).

Most of the systems involved in the process do not engage in the processing of stimuli in an active, conscious way; indeed, most internalization of environmental stimuli happens without a person ever being aware that it happened.

Cognitive activities such as reasoning or analyzing utilize resources in short-term memory and are attended to for only short periods of time.

Processed "objects," however, are not necessarily consciously attended to and can be stored in long-term memory for long periods of time (referred to as implicit learning).

The amount of information that can be stored short term is dwarfed by what we can hold in our longer-term memory.

The same set of systems responsible for reasoning and rational thought are also involved in emotion, feeling and processing body signals; there is no left brain/right brain separation.

Emotion is part of the process required to keep in mind the many facts that people consider when making decisions. As Damasio writes, "somatic markers are a special instance of feelings generated from secondary emotions. Those emotions and feelings have been connected, by learning, to predicted future outcomes of certain scenarios."

He goes on to suggest that negative somatic markers are essentially alarm bells and positive somatic markers are essentially incentives.

Implications

At first blush, it seems that two starting implications ultimately may provide some influence to media planning: The importance of integrated emotional and rational processing, and implicit learning.

It's a compelling notion that there is no left brain/right brain parallel system at work, that there is really an integrated system of

emotional and rational processing occurring at the same time. If that is the case, it further validates the need for a multimedia or multiple contact point approach to media plans.

This new view of the cognitive process would imply that any communication effort that focuses on only one aspect of a message will provide fuel for only a limited portion of our abilities and not leverage the full potential of cognitive brain process.

Since the processing system uses one mechanism that considers a limited number of stimuli for short periods of time, it would make sense to have communication elements that engage that mechanism.

But the short-term mechanism is seemingly the smaller component of the total system. It is interwoven with a long-term system that contains perhaps a limitless amount of stored information, much or all of it connected to what Damasio refers to as somatic markers.

Shouldn't communication efforts also attempt to engage these deeper, emotional mechanisms? Engaging those mechanisms has the potential to trigger stored markers that act as emotional incentives. This is a much more potent approach than trying to convey one entire selling message via short-term memory.

Here are two areas where traditional advertising approaches fall short.

First, we don't consistently include enough contact points in media plans. We tend to take what are commonly limited resources and focus them on one or two media types. Within our choices, we tend to focus on commodity aspects as opposed to how the targeted consumers interact with those choices. If we are in fewer media environments, doesn't it stand to reason that we have limited our ability to trigger that endless well of somatic markers?

Second, in the messages we deliver, our ads greatly favor rational selling messages, on the premise that consumers will actively engage with them. Maybe we should be taking time to consider the value of one linear chain of logic versus a wealth of emotional incentives that could potentially be attached to a brand.

Implicit Learning

The magnitude of difference between implicit learning and what can be addressed by short-term working memory (explicit learning) is a lot bigger than you might think.

A good discussion of this subject is provided by Robert Heath in "The Hidden Power of Advertising." In that discussion, Heath cites the works of Steven Rose and Lionel Standing, which focused on groups of volunteers participating in games. One set of games used explicit learning, in which pictured items are consciously perceived and stored in the mind, and one in which respondents simply perceive the image stimuli without having to consciously attempt to remember it.

In these games, the explicit learning test effectively becomes a test of recall, where, at best, participants remember maybe 17 or 18 of 20 slides. The second test is basically a recognition test. In that test, respondents could recognize far more images via implicit memory than those recalling via explicit memory—at least 500 times more images.

In those tests, Mr. Standing stopped at 10,000 images, because there was no decrease in performance by participants even at that point.

Considering these remarkable results, wouldn't it make sense for us as media planners to take a step back and reconsider the notion of impressions? While we have evolved beyond things like "percent paying full attention" to "engagement," we essentially have a habit of devaluing impressions because we deem them unattended by the consumer. That reality appears to be in fact wrong; that those messages indeed are attended, just in an unconscious way.

Further, it suggests we as media planners should be reconsidering in a deeper way what we used to believe were superfluous impressions. Though they may not be consciously attended, it is likely Damasio's somatic markers are being attached to those unattended messages.

Since it also appears that the markers attached to those messages will be emotional in nature and that emotion inevitably is linked to a potential rational conscious thought process at some future point, perhaps we should be thinking about how media plans should address that understanding.

Are there parts of the plan that use some impressions to lay down incentive-based emotional somatic markers? Are there other parts of the plan that deliver rational, incentive-based triggers to activate positive, emotional associations we have communicated previously? Are particular media better at delivering on different parts of this process?

What portion of the budget goes to which part of the process? If we haven't laid down emotional somatic markers, can we really jump immediately to a plan designed to deliver a rational selling message? Indeed, it seems that we could pencil down more questions than answers at this point. But that is not really the important take away of the discussion.

Our conventionality in creating media plans doesn't very closely reflect the actual learning process that occurs inside the black box. But the black box isn't quite as murky as it used to be. It's time we as media planners started reacting to the learning available to us.

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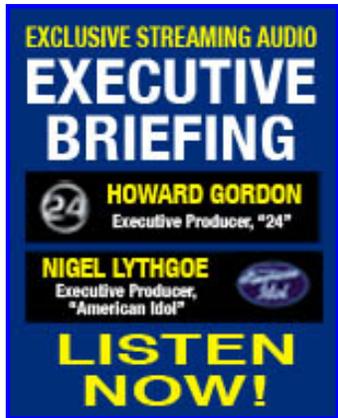
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