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GAL, Aug 06 vs. July/June 06, HH Rtg		June 06	July 06	Aug 06	June 06 July 06 Aug 06			
	NEW YORK WNYW/F, 630pm	1.2	1.3	1.4	PORTLAND KPTV/F, 12am	1.4	1.5	1.6
	DETROIT WJBK/F, 630pm	3.0	3.1	3.7	CHARLOTTE WCNC/N, 4pm	1.4	1.4	1.5
	PHOENIX KSAZ/F, 630pm	2.5	2.8	3.2	AUSTIN KTBC/F, 430pm	2.7	2.7	2.9
	ORLANDO WOFL/F, 11pm	2.0	2.1	2.3	Source: NSI WRAP Overights Plus, Live HH Rtg, June, July & Aug 2006 PA, PX = 6pm in June & July '06			



Media Business

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Don't Dismiss Viewers Who Don't Engage

Consumers Who Aren't Paying Attention Often Have Better Recall of Messages

By Mark Dominiak

Special to TelevisionWeek

Story continues below...



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Recent years have seen an explosion in media delivery forms and technology along with corresponding fragmentation of traditional media. These circumstances have blessed consumers with a vast array of media choices. But while the breadth of choice is wonderful for consumers, it's been disastrous for marketers.

Three phenomena have resulted. First, audiences for each individual medium are shrinking, forcing marketers to buy more to achieve mass reach. Second, marketing messages have swelled to fill newly created media landscapes, further cluttering communication environments. Finally, consumers have become increasingly disengaged. Inundated with messages and choice, consumers have evolved to tune out what they feel is superfluous, specifically choosing to redirect attention or use their TiVo.

The preferred course of action for slow-to-innovate marketers is focus and optimization: searching for "engaged" consumers. Media practitioners are following the same course, seeking to establish metrics and accountability based on audience engagement.

Marketers are convinced the appropriate messaging paradigm is to search for consumers rationally engaged in communication environments and deliver rational selling messages on behalf of brands. With fewer consumers occupied in engaged behavior, this course of action has become a process of looking for a needle in a haystack. Driven by belief that engaged consumers can be influenced to make purchases, marketers want their brands featured in engaged environments, paying premiums for the best real estate available.

On the surface, it seems impeccably true that attentive consumers are those we can most easily convince to purchase our brands. And marketers are very good at delivering rational messages and measuring how convincing they happen to be. But is engagement everything we believe it to be?

Value in Disengagement?

While it may rationally seem that a haystack of disengaged consumers has little value to communication efforts, instinctively those impressions don't seem to lack value. In this case, instinct is a shrewd barometer. There is profoundly deep impact generated by messages reaching disengaged consumers. And those impressions can have significantly positive impact for brands. But, curiously, there is very little understanding by marketers of the value in disengaged consumers.

Two cognitive mechanisms are at work in human neurology: explicit and implicit learning. Explicit learning is attentive and rational, focusing on conscious decision-making. It's what marketers target with communications.

On the other hand, there's the wholly different beast of implicit learning. Implicit learning taps more into feelings and emotions, also considering and categorizing environmental stimuli, just not consciously. Consider the flash of motion you may see through your peripheral vision. That flash is an environmental stimulus that causes you to duck in expectation of something coming your way even though you didn't consciously note or stop to rationally consider its meaning or your response. Your unconscious processing system handled that for you.

Implicit learning doesn't shut down for stimuli like marketing messages. It dutifully files away logos, packaging shapes, colors, associated images and emotional cues imbedded in messages, all without a consumer being consciously aware that it did. Those perceptions are categorized and tied to survival, pain and pleasure associations already stored in long-term memory. Perceptions remain in storage until needed to help in the decision-making process, consciously or subconsciously.

Playing Cards

In an experiment cited by psychologist Antonio Damasio, subjects were asked to play a game with decks of cards and a budget. The object was to select a card from one of four decks, wagering and either winning or losing money based on cards drawn. Any draw produced a win or a penalty. What subjects didn't know was that two decks were stacked with higher reward/lower penalty cards and the others with higher penalty/lower reward cards.

Later card tests included use of polygraph machines. Polygraph data allowed researchers to read physiological signals indicative of subconscious cognition. Researchers obtained a sense of whether or not, or how soon, subjects could determine the nature of the decks, identifying draw strategies that would net high rewards. Results demonstrated subjects were subconsciously able to identify high-penalty decks well in advance of conscious realization. Subjects surprisingly demonstrated physical aversion to "bad" decks early on in the game, and even when reaching for bad decks.

Damasio, in his book "Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain," suggests subconscious mechanisms help streamline cognitive process. "Helped by automated sorting-out, the subject would be 'helped into thinking' of the likely goodness or badness of each deck, that is be guided into a theory about the game. Basic body regulatory systems would prepare the ground for conscious, cognitive processing. Without such preparation, the realization of what is good and what is bad would

either never arrive, or arrive too late and be too little."

Imagine a sniffing consumer walking into the cold remedy aisle, suffering, seeking relief, only to be faced by a sea of options, few of which may be familiar. How does that compromised consumer make a decision? Damasio's observations provide an explanation.

"A preselection is carried out for you, sometimes covertly, sometimes not. A biological mechanism makes the preselection, examines candidates and allows only a few to present themselves for final exam." Just like the subconscious mechanism helping you to duck automatically when something comes your way.

In a Canadian study spanning 10 brands, five categories and 88 commercials, 5,000 respondents contributed data in pursuit of an advertising awareness model. Intriguingly, the study offers supportive evidence on behalf of the value of implicit learning. Specifically, findings touch on advantageous recall and erosion rates for emotional appeal advertisements that would be more likely engaged by implicit learning.

The study categorized commercials on a continuum from "Most Thinking" to "Most Feeling." One expectation was that Most Thinking brands would exhibit higher recall scores in concert with longstanding industry research paradigms. The Canadian researchers, however, decided to drop the Thinking vs. Feeling statement because their findings demonstrated a contrary conclusion-Feeling brands recorded higher recall scores than Thinking brands. In fact, the 10 Most Feeling brands had an average recall score almost double that of the top 10 Most Thinking brands.

Why would emotional brands fuel better rates of recall? Given the nature of explicit and implicit learning, one hypothesis is this: Highly rational messages are promptly engaged by the explicit learning mechanism, extremely powerful but highly ephemeral. Strong attention can be paid to those messages for a short period of time, but then are forgotten. Emotional messages are more quickly engaged by implicit memory. Attentive cognition doesn't occur, meaning a person would never know they absorbed the message. But that message would tenaciously remain in long-term memory, waiting for some trigger or association to evoke and present it to the conscious mind for consideration.

Maybe that's what's happening with the recall rates. People don't recall rational messages as well because those messages don't engage a brain mechanism allowing them to be remembered for long periods of time. Emotional messages don't suffer this drawback and can more easily be recalled over time, hence the advantageous recall rates.

Improved Recall

In work done by Steven Rose and Lionel Standing, groups of volunteers participating in memory games demonstrated the magnitude of difference between the implicit and explicit mechanisms. One set of games used explicit learning, in which pictured items were consciously perceived and stored in the mind, and one set used implicit learning, in which respondents simply perceived the image stimuli without having to consciously attempt to remember it.

Participants at best remembered 17 or 18 of 20 slides in the explicit learning test. In the implicit learning test, respondents could recognize far more images via implicit memory. In those tests, Mr. Standing stopped at 10,000 images because there was no decrease in performance by participants even at that point. That's a 500-to-1 advantage for our unconscious, "disengaged" minds. In that light, our impressive rational ability is a sliver.

Why, then, do marketers devote nearly all of their marketing resources toward that sliver? Clearly, the unconscious mind of the consumer we have traditionally considered "disengaged" isn't, and is vastly more capable of absorbing and storing information than "engaged" consumers can possibly be.

Yet marketing budgets are invested in creating ads that are recalled less well, wear out more quickly and are purchased at a premium because demand is high for disappearing engaged real estate. It would seem a serious reconsideration is in order.

While consumers remain interested in programming, they have evolved to a point where they don't pay much attention to

commercials because they don't expect to see or hear anything of real interest in ads. Consumers may think they've won the battle, but they physically cannot stop their implicit learning ability from continuing its relentless absorption of environmental stimuli.

As such, television's growing opportunity as a medium may likely be to engage the implicit learning cognitive mechanism. Television delivers sight, sound, motion, narrative and emotion, all elements that are very enticing to the implicit learning mechanism and cannot be avoided by consumers even if they consciously choose to disengage from advertising.

The implications of this are very positive for media planners. In a communications environment where consumers have evolved to wrest control of their media choices away from marketers, marketers no longer dictate flow of conversation; consumers do. The new environment works on a caveat venditor (seller beware) rather than a caveat emptor (buyer beware) paradigm. That means it's much more difficult for sellers to find environments conducive to making the sale.

But that environment doesn't exist in an unconscious learning mechanism consumers cannot control. In the unconscious cognitive portion of the consumer's mind, it is buyer beware. The playing field is much more level and planners have more breadth of inventory to choose from. Emotional brand messages can be delivered into consumer memory without consumers being able to do anything about it.

Competitors can't drown out messages. All messages will be categorized and stored. The challenge is to create emotional associations on behalf of the brand that are more powerful than those of competitors. In that way, when the subconscious mind rapidly pulls desirable alternatives forward to the explicit mechanism when need for conscious consideration arises, a brand with the most positive emotional associations is more likely to make the short list.

And opportunistically, it doesn't require deeper resources to deliver messages. Why pay premiums for programming perceived to be better at communicating? With the unconscious learning mechanism, programming is equal. The unconscious mind does not discriminate. Efficient inventory has more value than its price suggests.

So why do we focus so much attention on the engagement metric? In light of this new learning, it would seem media people are just pigeonholing themselves by believing the only programming of value is that where engagement occurs. If we stop and think about the advantages in recall, slower erosion, emotional communication and capacity of implicit learning, there is great value to be found in every television impression delivered, not just those delivered to an engaged audience.

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