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Online Brands and Brainwaves: *How neuroscience formed the basis for a brand's marketplace positioning*

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CI SUMMARY: Unless you understand how the brain really works—and why—you cannot be certain that the products and brands, marketing materials and messages, and all the other elements that make up the marketing mix are optimized for maximum impact. By monitoring actual brainwaves, marketers gain a picture window into the deep subconscious mind. Discover how neuroscience is used to understand how a brand is really perceived by its customers and prospects.

Traditional means of measuring consumer attitudes and beliefs—surveys and focus groups—can only evoke articulated responses. That is, they can only report what consumers say they think, feel, and believe about a brand. But neuroscience has a surprise for marketers of every description: the way the brain is basically designed, and the way it really works, reveals that focus groups and surveys alone cannot discover the whole truth about consumer attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs.

The way we are neurologically wired can actually prevent us from accurately reporting what we really think, feel, and remember when we are asked. The *real* truth lies below and beyond where conventional consumer research methods can delve—it lives in the subconscious mind. You have to dive deeply to get to it. And neurological testing is the vessel to take you there.

It only takes 500 milliseconds

Only 500 milliseconds separate fundamental truth from flawed interpretation. Dr. Robert Knight, one of the world's preeminent neuroscientists (and Chief Science Advisor to NeuroFocus) sums up the whole universe of marketing research in four words: "the brain makes behavior".

At first glance, that may seem patently obvious. But on deeper reflection, it encompasses the absolute essence and fundamental fact about why neurological testing stands so far apart from traditional methods of consumer research. Unless you understand how the brain really works—and why—you cannot be certain that the products and brands, marketing materials and messages, sponsorships, product placement, packaging, price points, and all the other elements that make up the marketing mix are optimized for maximum impact. That is as true for online brands as it is for the most long-established legacy brands sold on store shelves.

By monitoring actual brainwaves, marketers gain a picture window into the deep subconscious mind. Why is that so vital? The answer is simple: because that is where brand identity and purchase decisions are formed.

**The subconscious
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Purity at its best—no bias

A half-second is the total time it takes for the brain to receive a stimulus and react to it. That is when the 'data' is neurologically pure; when it is still newborn in the subconscious mind. That is when it is free from cultural biases, differences in education and language, and the host of other factors that influence—corrupt, really—the responses that people make when they are asked questions about their reactions to stimuli. This first 500 milliseconds is the point when neurological testing captures data in its pure form.

Why is it that answers are essentially corrupted information? Because they are based upon another 500 milliseconds—representing the second half of the brain's cognitive process after it receives a

stimulus. During that ‘second half’, the brain develops and delivers physical responses—words and gestures—to express its reaction. The conscious mind takes over.

As a result, that second half of the cognitive process is when the data is subject to all sorts of influences. Everything from what language you speak to what your grandmother told you come into play at this stage.

Data is subject to all sorts of influences...

Neuroscience reveals that when you are asked a question about how you think about something, or what you feel, or what you remember, *in the course of formulating your answer your brain actually changes the original data it received*. Since information gathered with other conventional forms of market research—such as surveys and focus groups—is collected at this stage, the answers are filtered through too many mental mechanisms to produce the level of pure, precise information that neurological testing does.

The seven dimensions of brand essence

NeuroFocus applied one of its patented tools to enable a large Internet company to gain that knowledge. The Brand Essence Framework (BEF) captures the subconscious resonance that brands have with consumers. To do so, the BEF studies seven different but complementary dimensions of a brand. Taken as a whole, these dimensions form the totality of how consumers perceive brands. The beauty and power of this tool is that individual dimensions can be neurologically isolated, measured, and evaluated, giving clients the flexibility to zero in on the aspects of their brands that are most critical to them.

The seven dimensions that comprise the Brand Essence Framework are:

- **Form:** attributes of the physical manifestation of the brand—product attributes, package attributes, aisle attributes, store attributes, location and category relationships
- **Function:** the unique and compelling functional attributes of the brand that provide a level of indispensability in our lives
- **Feelings:** the emotional archetype of the brand—the naturally-surfacing feelings that arise at the mere thought or mention of the brand
- **Values:** core values grounded in individual, social, global and moral precepts exemplified by the brand; brand connection points
- **Benefits:** the compelling benefits of interacting with the brand—financial, emotional, entertainment, education and self-worth-enhancing benefits
- **Metaphors:** the brand as a metaphor for a larger operating context—the brand becoming the tangible manifestation of life events, conditions, norms, aspirations, lessons and challenges
- **Extensions:** the natural logical extensions of the brand and its attributes to domains of interest not normally or logically covered

Looking for clarity

Looking to discover clarity about its brand, a large Internet company turned to NeuroFocus to take a good long look at how its brand was really being perceived by its customers and prospects. They selected three Brand Essence Framework dimensions (Functions, Feelings and Benefits) to study. BEF studies center around specific brand attributes within each dimension that are identified as key components of the brand’s identity.

For each of the three dimensions selected, three specific words or phrases were chosen as attributes representative of the brand. They were:

- **Function:** safe, speed, ease-of-use
- **Feelings:** assurance, streamlined, insightful
- **Benefits:** options, reliable, rewarding

In addition to the BEF, NeuroFocus also deployed an online survey to gain articulated responses to compare with those from the neurological testing.

Brand Essence Framework study parameters

Subjects were tested based upon a specific screener protocol provided by the company, NeuroFocus recruited 20 consumers. They comprised a scientifically valid, neurologically ideal blend of 10 men and 10 women. This group was further tested with various levels of users between male and female.

Enlightening results

For the “Function” dimension, “Speed” ranked the highest among the three brand attributes tested, especially with “Regular” users. This degree of resonance indicates that this particular attribute becomes more important to repeat consumers. Men had a stronger response than women. (The

“Function” dimension typically has a higher neurological ranking with men than women.)

The online survey demonstrated the same overall degree of resonance for “Speed”.

For the “Feelings” dimension, “Insightful” resonated best overall. Among all users, “Insightful” ranked the highest of the brand attributes.

With men, “Assurance” ranked alongside “Insightful”. Women exhibited a stronger subconscious response to “Insightful” than men did. (The “Feelings” dimension evokes stronger levels of responses among women than it does with men.)

In the survey, “Assurance” ranked highest.

For the “Benefits” dimension, “Reliable” achieved the strongest subconscious resonance. That attribute also ranked highest with women

The survey results showed the opposite: “Reliable” ranked as the lowest attribute among the three. This difference serves to underscore the scientific advantages that neurological testing offers companies seeking to discern what consumers truly perceive about their brands.

This difference serves to underscore the scientific advantages...

Optimized for maximum impact

NeuroFocus’ evaluation of the study resulted in specific implications and recommendations that not only increase brand awareness, but also deliver targeted messaging that truly resonates with their user base. These guidelines include:

- Leverage the inherent strengths of the “Insightful” brand attribute by emphasizing how users can benefit from their superior knowledge and abilities by using the service.
- Launch a special marketing effort targeted toward women, also based upon the “Insightful” brand attribute platform
- Focus marketing messages on how the company empowers individuals, and has a core brand identity well aligned with companies that have carefully-cultivated relationships with their customers (such as Southwest Airlines, for example) that foster strong brand loyalty and repeat usage.
- Explore the potential for using social networks as a communications channel to reach the female audience. The BEF study shows that this group has more of an emotional attachment to the brand (stronger results in the “Feelings” and “Benefits” dimensions).
- For the male audience, focus on practical advantages. They tend to see the brand as more of a ‘tool’ than a ‘friend’ (strong resonance in the “Functional” dimension).

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