

Penetrating the Mind by Metaphor

By EMILY EAKIN

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hat does a Buddhist monk meditating in a soccer stadium during a game have to do with Coca-Cola? Everything, says Gerald Zaltman, a maverick marketing professor at the Harvard Business School. Just don't expect a Coke drinker to tell you this.

Hold a focus group or circulate a questionnaire, and you'll learn that Coke is a "high-energy, thirst-quenching, fun-at-the-beach" kind of drink, Mr. Zaltman says. Someone might even mention a soccer game. But stuff like monks and meditation just doesn't come up.

Which, in Mr. Zaltman's view, is only further proof that focus groups and questionnaires — the dominant techniques in his field — are more often than not a waste of time.

"Most new products are developed and launched using those techniques," Mr. Zaltman, 63, said recently during an interview at his Harvard office. "And 60 to 80 percent of all new products fail."

A slight, sprightly man with graying hair, a dimpled grin and a manner almost preternaturally mild, Mr. Zaltman makes an unlikely apostate. Yet he calls focus groups "the F word." And while the conventional wisdom in his field says to take consumers at their word — to grill them about their tastes, buying habits and favorite brands — he seeks to converse directly with their brains instead.

A member of the Mind, Brain, Behavior Initiative at Harvard, an interdisciplinary study group, he meets regularly with experts on human cognition. And he has dabbled with brain scans as a means of testing the effectiveness of advertisements. But he is best known as the creator of ZMET (pronounced ZEE-met), the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique. The first patented marketing research tool in the United States, it represents an unusual attempt to put some of the insights of neuroscience (along with generous helpings of semiotics and Carl Jung) to profitable use as a window into consumer attitudes toward everything from art museums to laundry detergent.

Citing prominent scholars of the human brain — like Steven Pinker and Antonio Damasio — Mr. Zaltman argues that consumers can't tell you what they think because they just don't know. Their deepest thoughts, the ones that account for

their behavior in the marketplace, are unconscious. Not only that, he insists, those thoughts are primarily visual as well.

"Because we represent the outcome of thoughts verbally, it's easy to think that thought occurs in the form of words," he said. "That's just not the case."

To uncover people's hidden thoughts about the products they use, ZMET relies on visual images. The study Mr. Zaltman conducted for Coca-Cola in Europe last year was typical. Small groups of paid volunteers were asked to spend a week collecting at least a dozen pictures from magazines, catalogs or any other source that captured their feelings about Coca-Cola. Then, they discussed the images during a two-hour private interview with a ZMET specialist. Finally, they created a digital collage with their images and recorded a short text about its meaning.



Jared Leeds for The New York Times
Gerald Zaltman, a Harvard Business School professor who discounts the value of focus groups, has developed an alternative method that draws on neuroscience, semiotics and the ideas of Carl Jung.

After studying the interview transcripts and images for recurring themes, Mr. Zaltman's team came to this conclusion: Coke evokes not just feelings of invigoration and sociability — something its maker has long known and exploited in its ads — but feelings of calm, solitude and relaxation as well. Indeed, the paradoxical essence of Coke is neatly summed up by the image, taken from an actual ZMET interview, of the Buddhist monk meditating in the crowded soccer field.

"The big insight we had is that Coke is really two drinks in one," Mr. Zaltman recalled with a chuckle. "They'd really been marketing half a Coke."

The Coca-Cola Company agreed. To impress the point on its division presidents during a meeting in Vienna, the complimentary Coke bottles lining the conference table were deliberately served only half full.

Since he began using ZMET nearly 10 years ago, Mr. Zaltman has completed more than 200 studies. Some are part of his own academic research and take place at his Mind of the Market Lab at Harvard. Many others, however, are conducted by his private consulting firm, Olson Zaltman Associates, for wealthy corporations like DuPont, General Motors, Reebok and AT&T that are willing to cough up the roughly \$75,000 he charges for his services.

Mr. Zaltman has assessed peoples' deep thoughts about everything from Nestle Crunch bars and Downy to dental offices, the Internet, panty hose and babies' bowel movements. And though many clients are reluctant to discuss their ZMET results for fear of betraying company secrets, they have praise for the technique itself.

Drake Stimson, a marketing director at Procter & Gamble, credits ZMET for the unexpected success of “Febreze”, an odor-removing fabric spray, though he declined to say exactly what Mr. Zaltman's research had revealed. "In our first-year launch, we made \$230 million in sales," Mr. Stimson said. "Based on our test market, we were expecting to make half of that. From our perspective, ZMET enabled us to double our sales volume."

Tom Brailsford, a manager of technological research at Hallmark, which has used ZMET for studies on both mothers and memory, said he had found the technique impressive. "It really does touch a part of consumers you can't get to with any other technique I've ever seen," he said. "It's not that consumers won't tell you what's on their minds. It's that they can't."

Mr. Zaltman attributes that insight to brain scientists. But he dates his original thinking about vision and cognition to a 1990 vacation in Nepal with his wife. An avid photographer, Mr. Zaltman had planned to shoot lots of film on the trip. But it occurred to him that it would be more interesting to ask residents of the villages he would be visiting to take pictures instead. The Zaltmans ended up trekking through the Nepalese countryside, lugging sacks of cheap Instamatic cameras and 600 rolls of film donated by Eastman Kodak.

"We were in very Nepal, where tourists Mr. Zaltman recalled. cameras and was: assume you're village and move you wanted to tell place what life was pictures would you

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remote areas of typically don't go," "And we gave people assignments. One going to leave this somewhere else and people in the new like here. What take to show them?"

After traveling to the film, the Zaltmans villages to distribute prints. With the help of a translator, they interviewed the local photographers — many of whom were using a camera for the first time —

Katmandu to develop returned to the

about their work. "What it revealed to me was the inadvertent arrogance of the idea that unsophisticated people didn't have sophisticated thoughts," Mr. Zaltman said. "In fact, the stories these people told about these images were amazingly complex."

In many photos, for example, he noticed that people's feet were cut off. Initially, he blamed the photographers' inexperience for the phenomenon. But in discussing the images, he learned that the effect was deliberate: bare feet were a sign of poverty, a condition the local photographers were loathe to reveal.

Back at Harvard, Mr. Zaltman continued to think about images. Why, he wondered, did marketing experts tend to work with words and numbers when companies did most of their marketing through pictures? "I was aware of this mismatch between the way information is delivered and the way in which people had to react to that information," Mr. Zaltman said. "What if we presented data in the form that consumers actually experienced them? Words, but also visual metaphors." He began reading about neuroscience and synthesizing the ideas that became ZMET. In 1995, he was invited to join the Mind, Brain, Behavior Initiative.



ZMET
A digital collage of people's thoughts and feelings about Nestlé Crunch (yes, Nestlé Crunch), based on a new marketing technique.

Obviously, misguided marketing isn't the only reason new products fail. And in a field known for faddishness, Mr. Zaltman's technique could turn out to be simply the latest flash in the pan. After all, marketing experts have dabbled in other disciplines before with notoriously mixed results. For a time in the 1950's, Freud-inspired "motivational research" was all the rage, with specialists like the Austrian psychologist Ernest Dichter advising companies like the General Foods Corporation on how to enhance the subliminal content of its Jell-O ads. But the method fell into disrepute after Vance Packard, in the 1957 best seller "The Hidden Persuaders," called it manipulative, comparing it to the "chilling world of George Orwell and his Big Brother."

Two decades later, physiology was hot. To track people's emotional responses to television pilots and advertisements, researchers homed in on their eyeballs, recording the dilations and contractions of their pupils. "The pupil-dilation technique was used by every network," said Jagdish Sheth, a professor of

marketing at Emory University. "Whenever the pupil contracted, they cut that bit out. But when they kept the emotional level high all the time to keep the pupil dilated, the pilot failed miserably."

Until recently, marketing's most highly touted innovations — the focus group and the questionnaire — had managed to escape a similar fate. But experts are becoming increasingly disenchanted with these as well. "What marketing has discovered is that the tools crafted in the 1950's don't work as well as they used to," said Paco Underhill, the author of "Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping" (Simon & Schuster, 1999).

As a result, companies may be more willing than usual to try out novel ideas. Nevertheless, experts say, in the long run ZMET could go the way of previous experiments. "Zaltman is getting into an area which is the new and upcoming area, mind/brain," said Mr. Sheth. "It's going to grow for the next 5 to 10 years and have a tremendous following and then like anything else, it's going to die."

But Mr. Zaltman isn't letting naysayers dampen his enthusiasm. His current projects include a potentially lucrative plan to peddle ZMET to movie studios. "We'll use it with consumers to get their reaction to a treatment, synopsis or a full script," he said. "We've done some experimentation in all of those settings and it looks like a really neat application."

Grinning bashfully, he allowed himself to imagine a day when ZMET is a household word in Hollywood: "Probably what will happen is that a studio might say, 'O.K. But has your script been ZMET-ed yet?'"