

Getting Inside—Way Inside—Your Customer’s Head

Jerry Zaltman’s focus groups are more like therapy sessions. But he’s proven that lots of brands can use a shrink. Here’s how his ZMET formula really works.

Billions a year on market research, MBAs out the wazoo, and still, 60 to 80 percent of new products simply bomb. The reason, explains Harvard professor Jerry Zaltman, is that marketers rely on the tragically flawed assumption that shoppers know how to make rational choices. “Ninety-five percent of thought, emotion, and learning occur in the unconscious mind -- that is, without our awareness,” Zaltman says, and that includes 95 percent of the thoughts, emotions, and learning that drive our purchases.

So how do you tap into that underlying 95 percent

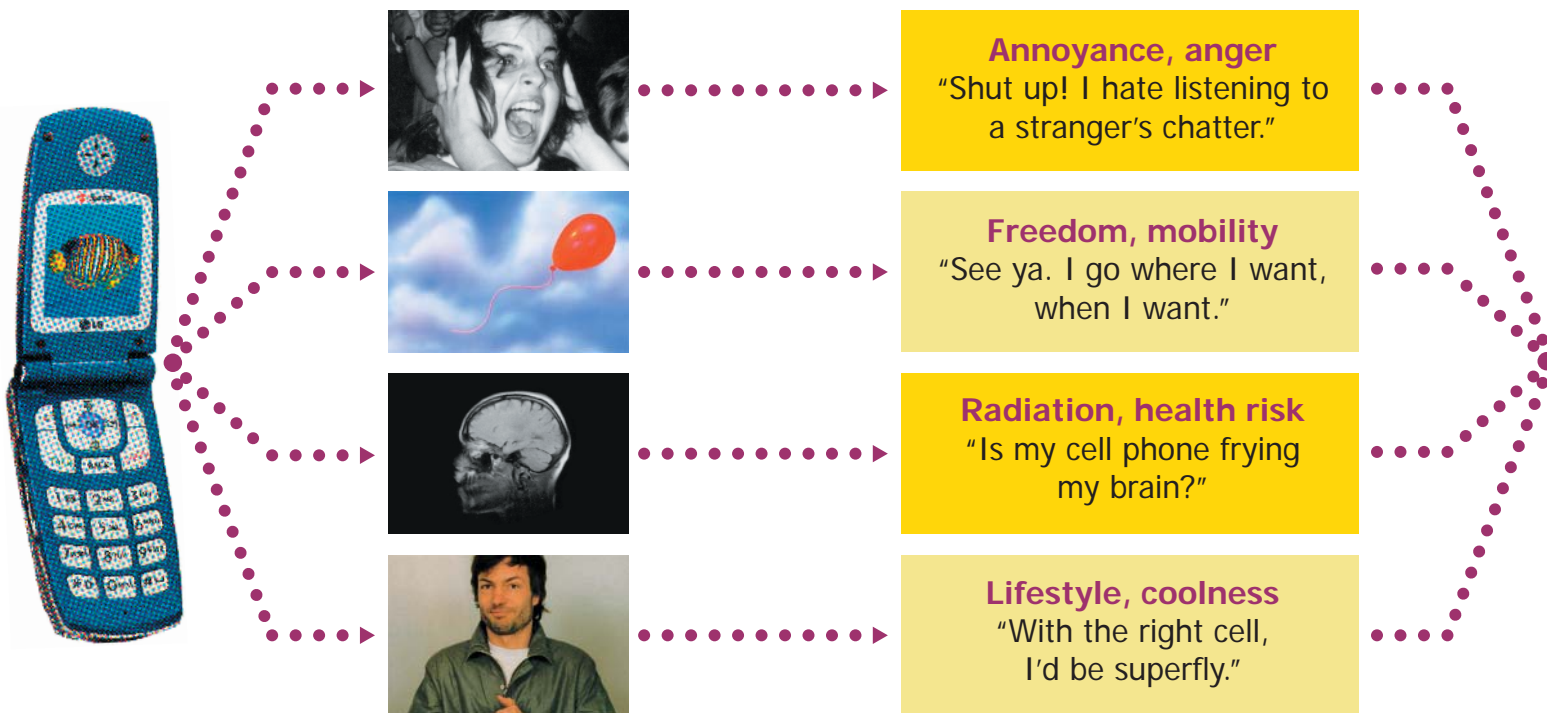
- and market products to their subconscious strengths? That’s what Zaltman has studied for the past five years at a Harvard think tank and in his corporate consulting practice. In his new book, *How Customers Think*, Zaltman details how he developed his patented approach to penetrating the dark recesses of the consumer mind: the Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique, or ZMET, in which subjects are asked to explain with images, not just words, their true feelings about anything from socks to search software. AT&T (T), Coca-Cola (KO), DuPont (DD), and Procter & Gamble (PG) have all used ZMET to ferret out the subliminal appeal of their products. (Coke,

1 Submit Images

As with all ZMET tests, the first step is a homework assignment. I’m asked to select 6 to 10 images that reflect my true feelings about cell phones. So I get a pile of glossies, pour a fresh mug of Peet’s coffee, and let ‘em rip. I choose pictures that illustrate obvious thoughts (like reacting to “cell yell”) and others that surprise me. The process reminds me of making mix tapes in college.

2 Define Them

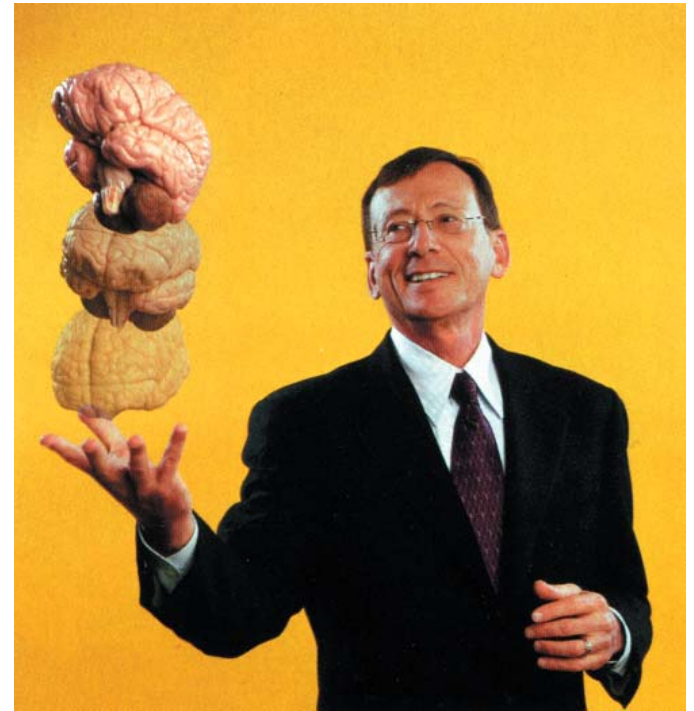
In a two-hour interview, Lindsay Zaltman, Jerry’s 30-year-old son and associate, asks me to explain what I’ve chosen. He probes with follow-up questions. It’s a bit like therapy. When I say cell phones save time but could also intrude on “down time,” he asks me to explain why I consider my time important. Later he identifies this as a commercially promising theme: Cell phones help people “make the most” of their time.



THE PRODUCT SHRINK
AT&T, Coca-Cola, and Procter & Gamble have all used Zaltman's ZMET process to refine marketing strategy.

for example, discovered through ZMET that its peppy soft drink elicited feelings of solitude as well as sociability.) Now even Hollywood is lining up: Zaltman and two partners recently launched the Story Development Studio, a spinoff consultancy designed to help screenwriters and producers develop scripts and market finished films.

But as popular as "ZMETing" (zee-met-ting) has become with a clique of corporate execs, to most people it sounds (understandably) like psychobabble. To gain an appreciation of how it actually works, I submitted to a ZMET test, to tap into my deepest desires and fears ... about the cell phone. - Brad Wieners



3 Assemble the Collage

With John Bell, Zaltman's in-house Photoshop whiz, I create a collage out of my images. "Think of it as a puzzle," he suggests. "Tell me how these images fit together." The idea is to explore how the various feelings I have about cell phones relate to one another. The resulting image looks like bad album-cover art, but it's what Zaltman uses to identify trends among respondents and guarantees lively discussion in clients' boardrooms.

4 Deconstruct

"The key issue was control," Lindsay says. "Cell phones were a solution but also a problem. You were freed by them, but also bound by them." Another theme: connectedness. Though you'd think the most relaxing time is when a phone is off, I explain that having it on -- and being available to loved ones -- makes me more relaxed. "That could be the premise of an ad campaign," Lindsay says. "The right cell phone makes you a better friend."



This woman apparently represents my yearning to join an elite tribe of cell users, but also a sense of vulnerability to being spied on.

Call it cell envy: This is a guy I imagined having the phone I'd want - signifying that phones, despite triggering rage, convey appreciation for cool design.

This sphere stands for a paradox - that phones provide "all-world access" but bind me to work. I'm free to move about the planet, but never "off".

The dude's kilt represents the endless array of cell-phone plans that I resent having to be an expert on.