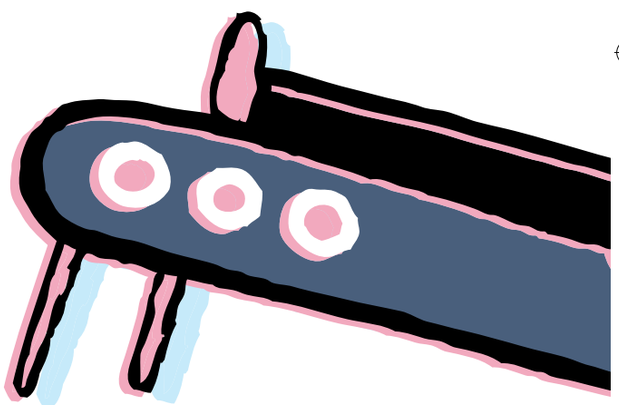
ADVERTISING ON THE COUCH

It's up there with art versus science, Richard Dawkins versus the Pope, Man United versus Everyone Else... when it comes to enduring rivalries, you don't get much bigger than Creatives versus Research. It's undeniably irritating to have your work picked apart by whitecoats with clipboards. But fields such as psychology and neuroscience are exploding with new insights into human behaviour and clients are increasingly interested in finding reliable ways to quantify their marketing spend. Is it time for creatives to get to grips with psychology and the sciences of human behaviour, and can it be done without losing the originality and emotional impact that makes their work so powerful?



Wake up to Nudge Theory

Psychology and neuroscience are vast fields – inevitably as complex as the human brain. There are many different angles and perspectives, from social psychology, which considers our interpersonal relationships, to biological psychology, which looks at the chemical and electrical systems in the brain, or even evolutionary psychology, which attempts to draw links between current human behaviour and our prehistoric past. And any of these sub-fields potentially has many valid insights for advertising. Currently the ideas gaining most traction in the industry are behavioural economics, neuromarketing and a bit of old-fashioned psychoanalysis.

So-called 'Nudge Theory', or behavioural economics, is an idea that has found favour with everyone from Barack Obama to outgoing IPA president Rory Sutherland. It's the idea that our economic decisions are informed by social, cognitive and emotional factors. People don't exist in a vacuum, we don't always make decisions based on logic and we use stereotypes and assumptions to frame or skew our understanding of the world.

Understanding these quirks of behaviour – so the theory goes – helps us understand quirks in the market. In terms of advertising, by understanding the mental short cuts that we use to make decisions, we should be able to create advertising that fits better with the way we think. It's an idea that's been gaining currency over the last few years. In the UK, the IPA (Institute of Practitioners in Advertising) set up a Behavioural Economics Think Tank and Task Force, bringing together leading psychologists and industry figures. "What's interesting is that it's taken seed more wildly than I dared hope. Planners have really taken to it and a large number of creative people find it fascinating, " says IPA president, Rory Sutherland.

So what the hell is neuromarketing?

Neuromarketing is another area with a growing presence – though it has not been greeted with a universally enthusiastic response from the ad industry. Also known as neurometrics, it's an approach that combines various brain-scanning techniques with measures such as heart rate, skin conductance (that's what the experts call 'sweatiness') or memory, to establish the emotional impact and effectiveness of a campaign.

But while these neuroscience methods can provide useful insight and feedback if implemented well, it's important to bear in mind exactly what these techniques cannot tell us about advertising. They can show approximately which brain areas are activated by a spot or a brand, but they can't read minds and they can't tell us why something is happening.

While large multinationals such as P&G have in-house neuroscientists to undertake this sort of research and many brands work directly with

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The great divide between creatives and whitecoats is narrowing as new advances in neuroscience are attracting clients to 'the science bit' like bees are attracted to pollen. But what does the neuroscience of advertising have in store for those on the creative front line? *Laura Swinton* scans the latest brainwaves

neuromarketing companies, ad agencies have, by and large, remained tentative, if not downright sceptical. It's understandable – using science and objective measures to assess a piece of creative work can seem reductive and miss the subtleties of a spot.

Agency planners and creatives I spoke with shared many similar horror stories about dodgy research. Take, for example, the spot that was judged to have zero emotional impact despite eliciting extreme fear and enjoyment over the course of the story – researchers simply subtracted the negative emotional responses from the positives and came out with a big fat nothing.

But the odd experience of poor research should not discredit a whole

"A discipline where you're looking at influencing people's decision making surely must be underpinned by some sort of theory. But when you get into an agency you realise that's not the case at all."

field. While there certainly are a few snakeoil merchants out there, promising the earth, the credible companies tend to be run by university academics who are more liable to be open about their methods and honest about both the strengths and flaws of their approach. Most will focus on small tweaks rather than a wholesale overhaul.

Moreover neuromarketing techniques seem to provide the most exciting and usable insight not when picking apart completed work but when carrying out completely new research.

Heather Andrew of Neuro-Insight recalls one project for Thinkbox, the commercial TV marketing organisation. "We wanted to look at people's neurostates when watching TV advertising versus online. We found that watching TV involved lower levels of attention but higher levels of memory encoding. Online, memory and emotional response was lower, but attention was much higher. More interestingly, we found that if people saw an ad on TV first, the TV exposure primed them to be more responsive when they encountered the brand online. But seeing something online did not enhance reception to the TV ad. It makes sense, because TV advertising is more about creating a brand feeling, whereas people go online to find more specific messages and information."

No more Oedipus Schmoedipus

Neuro-marketing and behavioural economics is a far cry from many people's idea of psychology. It's all oestrogen and EEG instead of Oedipus complexes and existential crises – reflecting shifts within the discipline which is keen to portray itself as a hard science.

Running parallel to the brain scans and hard science is a more subjective approach to psychological advertising research that draws from counselling techniques, psycho-analysis and art therapy. Lindsay Zaltman is the managing director of Olson Zaltman, a firm that uses deep, metaphor-based interview techniques to draw consumer insights from the participants' unconscious minds.

Interviewees bring in images that metaphorically represent a particular product or brand and are invited to talk around these images to gain deeper insight. Zaltman most recently appeared in Morgan Spurlock's documentary on branding, *POM Wonderful Presents: The Greatest Movie Ever Sold*, as the adventurous filmmaker underwent a session to uncover the personality of Brand Spurlock. It's a far cry from the 'objective' science of the neuromarketers or nudgers but Zaltman reckons traditional psychoanalysis can provide a useful counterbalance.

"There is some really sexy research out there measuring all sorts of metrics. For example they can tell you that a pleasure area of the brain has lit up but they can't tell you what type of pleasure it is. Is it an indulgent pleasure? A contented pleasure? An excited pleasure? A more qualitative approach can tell you that."

Indeed, emotional (or affective) neuroscience suggests that, biologically, there are only a limited number of emotions with distinct patterns of brain activation and bodily responses. Nuances of emotion are more subjective, created by language and learning and can't be detected by biological measures alone.

The expansion of possible psychological and neuroscientific methods to be used with advertising is impressive, but potentially confusing. With the current popularity of the likes of Malcolm Gladwell, who drew huge crowds at this year's Cannes Lions festival, and the growth of neuromarketing over the past decade, it seems our appetite for understanding the human mind and applying that understanding to advertising has never been greater.

You don't have to be mad men to work here

The relationship between creatives and psychology is nothing new, and comes with its own set of Daddy Issues.

As early as 1896, experimental psychologists were trying to peer inside the minds of consumers. These early researchers came up with a theory that should gladden the heart of any megalomaniacal creative director – they thought that advertising worked as a form of hypnotism, with the copywriter pulling the puppet strings.

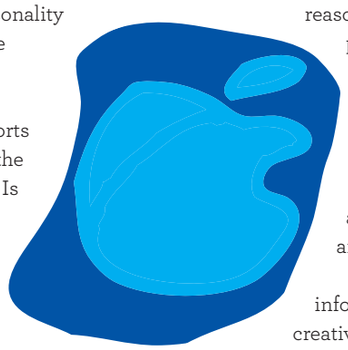
The relationship between the disciplines was cemented in 1920 when John B Watson, the influential father of behavioural psychology was unceremoniously kicked out of John Hopkins University following a scandalous, headline-hitting affair with a student – and he found refuge with a certain J Walter Thompson. Watson, who is famous for his work on phobia (in particular training a small toddler to fear fluffy white bunnies), quickly rose through the ranks of the agency and became a vice president. He was part of the agency's drive to legitimise advertising by demonstrating a scientific rationale behind the work.

By the 50s, psychologists were a well-established part of the agency landscape. Vance Packard released *Hidden Persuaders*, a squillion-selling book on the psychological techniques deployed by advertisers and politicians to manipulate the public.

But despite the history – and the shiny new modern techniques clogging up the aisles at ad festivals – these days psychology and its cousin, neuroscience, don't enjoy the same privileged position within the industry.

Intuition versus theory

The common perception among psychology students and academics is that advertisers deliberately use well-established theories in order to manipulate and persuade – but the truth of the creative process is more intuitive and organic. "I was always interested in psychology at university. It's part of the reason I went into advertising, because I expected more psychology. A discipline where you're looking at influencing people's decision making surely must be underpinned by some sort of theory. But when you get into an agency you realise that's not the case at all," says Ed Gardiner, a former accounts exec who took some psychology classes as an undergraduate and has since returned to academia to study cognition and decision sciences.



But while the creative process may not be explicitly informed by scientific theories, that doesn't mean that creatives don't have their own intuitive grasp of human

The insider's guide to changing minds

Rory Sutherland, IPA president and vice-president of Ogilvy Group UK on 'satisficing' punters and nervy creatives getting beaten up by bad science

Where does psychology fit within advertising?

If you look at the 'golden age' of advertising in the United States, the three giants – Bernbach, Ogilvy and Howard Gossage – were fascinated by adjacent academic areas of study, partly for a need for respectability and partly due to their absolutely sincere pursuit of knowledge. In that era, there were all sorts of people looking at psychological theories and how they might be applied – you might even say it got a little excessive.

However the pendulum then swung too far the other way. We developed a model that was very simplistic, incomplete and in some cases diametrically wrong. One way you can give commercial advantage to a brand is to have better consumer understanding than the next guy.

What sort of insights can psychology and behavioural economics give that we are missing out on?

The persuasion/argument model used in most briefs today has certain assumptions. For example it assumes that attitudinal change precedes behavioural change, whereas a lot of studies show that it is the other way round. If a man says 'my wife doesn't understand me' he isn't going to have an affair, it means he's already had one. What happens is that a person gets drunk at a party, and in a desperate effort to make sense of their incongruous actions, they concoct a case against their wife. Changes in behaviour comes before changes in attitudes.

We also have to understand the kind of shortcuts we use when making decisions. You can't fully understand a brand until you understand satisficing – that is settling for something that's 'good enough'. In most decisions most of the time in most categories, we don't try to get the very best result that we can, we want to make sure that we're not getting ripped off. Unless we're very anal, we don't spend six weeks researching technological minutiae when choosing a flat screen TV. We just want a good TV that won't break. What brands do is they generally provide a good degree of predictability. McDonald's have realised that people don't want the best burger in the world, they want one just like the one they had last time. People like predictability as it helps avoid disappointment – and fear works twice as acutely than hope.

How do you see the relationship between psychological research and creativity?

One of the things that a lot of behavioural science shows is that the creative instinct is quite good. I've become more respectful of creative people and creative awards since studying behavioural economics. You realise that the emotional effect of advertising is more important than the argumentative component. But creatives have to sell their work to people who don't have these instincts. To a CEO brought up in a finance or engineering culture it's near impossible to believe that advertising that is likeable can be more effective than advertising that is persuasive. You need to have a good vocabulary and scientific understanding to explain why it will work.

I think creatives would feel less neurotic if they understood it not only instinctively but also scientifically. They suffer a kind of neurosis because they know that they are right but they can't always explain why – it's a Cassandra complex.

In the battle between good creativity and bad science, bad science often wins. Creatives are fearful – they've been beaten up with shit science so often that they have a completely unwarranted aversion to science as a whole. We'll never beat bad science with creativity alone, but we'll beat it with better science and good creativity.

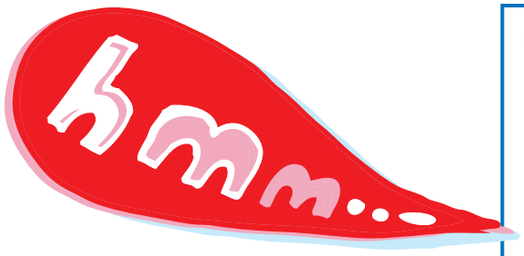
behaviour. Advertising is as much a psychological pursuit as it is strategic or creative. Empathy with and understanding of the motivations of other people is crucial. As far as creatives are concerned, the same imagination that fuels the originality, aesthetics and artistry of the industry can also help project itself into the minds of the target demographic. Indeed the best creative work is that which demonstrates an intuitive grasp of psychology, gathered through experience.

Sean Ehringer, a director with Tool of North America, majored in psychology at university but reckons he rarely, if ever, refers to theory in his work. "I think creative people are generally observers, they're informed by what they see," he muses. "If you look at a campaign like Skittles – say the *Midas Touch* spot or *Piñata Man* – it works because whoever wrote them understands people. There's a sadness to the work, an understanding that too much of what you love can be horrible, an understanding of what it's like to feel different."

The age of neuromanticism

In any case, a solid piece of research or psychological theory alone will not automatically result in effective advertising – it's when paired with the natural insight of good creative that magic happens. Such was the case with the gold Lion-winning Transport for London 2007 viral *Moonwalking Bear*. The spot features two teams of basketball players who divert viewer attention away from a dancing bear. It reproduces an experiment by psychologists Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris who were researching a cognitive phenomenon known as inattentional blindness – our inability to perceive things that are right in front of us. An online video of the original experiment had been shared round the creative team's office. It was the perfect piece of insight into a brief they were working on to alert drivers to the dangers of unseen cyclists.

However it was thanks to the team's understanding of human nature that this science was transformed into an effective piece of work. "It doesn't ever apportion blame," explains creative Simon Aldridge. "The one thing we wanted to avoid was saying 'you're a bad driver'. As soon as you start blaming people they stop



listening. It's just human nature." Despite working on this spot – and the follow-up, which explored the phenomenon of change blindness (our inability to perceive gradual change) – Aldridge reckons that while psychology can provide handy insights, advertising and creativity are not generally exercises in mind control and manipulation. "I've been doing this for 20 years and at no point have I thought 'here's how we can sneakily get inside people's heads'. We just know that if you make something amusing, interesting and worth engaging with, people will like it."

The art beyond the empirical

But while it's possible for art and psychological research to co-exist and even spark off each other, it's not always the case. Creatives worry that using empirical research restricts creativity and undermines the power and validity of art. When applied to a freshly completed piece of work, a critical research report can feel punitive and undermining – but this may be an argument for a change in the way that advertising and psychology interact rather than a wholesale rejection of psychology. Instead of using psychology and neuroscience to promote 'effectiveness' it might be more liberating to incorporate them earlier on in the process – when writing briefs, for example. The insights can then serve as springboards rather than straightjackets.

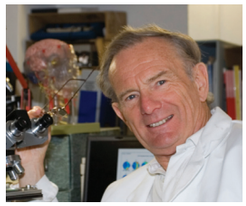
Dr David Lewis, of Mindlab, a neuromarketing company based at the University of Sussex, has been pioneering neuromarketing since the 80s and argues that the science may help refine the creativity but it will never replace it. "No one wants to homogenise things. The great thing about advertising is the creativity behind it, the way it looks at things in a different way," he says. "I think advertising is a highly creative industry and always will be. We're never going to be in a position where a computer can come up with adverts. The human brain will always be superior in its ability to make associations. We should rejoice in our creativity and not feel restrained."

The creativity of science

Neuromarketers and psychologists are thinking scientifically about advertising creativity – but perhaps its time to turn the tables and start thinking creatively about science. David Schwarz of creative outfit Hush feels that, given the prevalence of technology in modern design and advertising, creatives should not be fearing or avoiding neuroscience. "We're not all from artsy backgrounds; we have an interesting mix of people from computer science and economics. There's a lot of empirical and statistical mathematics in what we do by nature. The tools of today's advertising are not a brush and canvas. They're interesting, complex tools that require a bit of objective thinking. Using coding to generate abstract images is a complex thing. I don't think designers or creators or advertisers should be scared."

It's a fair point. Advertising has embraced digital technology and taken it in all kinds of unexpected, creative directions, so we can't be completely technophobic. Ingenuity and inventiveness is what the industry does best, so perhaps its time to start thinking creatively about psychology. S

Tomorrow's world today



Mind Lab's Dr David Lewis, neuromarketing pioneer, on how it all began and where it's going

How did you come across the idea of combining experimental psychology with advertising?

In the 1980s I was lecturing in clinical psychology and psychopathology at Sussex University and I started using a very early form of EEG (electro encephalography) machine for measuring electrical activity in the brain. I needed some stimuli that had to fulfil certain criteria: they had to be short because the processing capacity of computers in those days was fairly limited and so I happened across the idea of using television commercials – not because I was particularly interested in advertising but because they were a very good 15-30 second stimuli designed by highly creative people. I wrote to agencies to ask for VHS copies of unaired commercials. The trade magazines became interested and in 1990 the BBC science programme *Tomorrow's World* ran a feature on it. But I had no interest in the commercial sphere and focussed on the academic sphere until about 2004.

What can neuroscience tell us?

We like to think of ourselves as rational, conscious beings but most of our judgements are made below the level of consciousness. Even the most willing participant in the most expertly-run focus group doesn't have access to that data. We look at measures of attention, emotion and comprehension. People can be paying attention but not be very engaged, and if they're not engaged they're less likely to act on it.

Neuromarketing is a term I don't really like – it was coined in 2002 by Al Schmidt at Rotterdam business school. It suggests that we can throw out the methodologies and the science and stick some electrodes on someone's head and know what they're thinking – well that's just not true.

You started off working with traditional TV spots – what about more recent advertising innovations?

Recently we've been exploring permission advertising. We worked with the people behind the TV show *Come Dine With Me*, and we wrote a programme which allowed people to click on items contestants were using, allowing them to find out more. We tested it out and found that when people had this control, it was way more powerful than traditional advertising, both in terms of immediate purchasing intent and subsequent recall.

These days people tend to fast-forward ads – but our work shows that even if you see a commercial at speed you can still pick up the message. It's not a complete waste of money. Digital natives (young people who have grown up using computers) tend to be visually literate and able to understand visual information at a far faster rate. You'll find that programmes designed for young people have shorter average shot lengths, with rapid cuts that can be almost subliminal. Older people find it very hard to process.