

# THE GRAND PARADOX OF BRANDING

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**BRANDOPUS**

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# THE BRAND AS A VISUAL CONSTRUCT

The behaviour of the consumer in the real world rarely corresponds with marketers' predictions, thanks in part to the way the human brain filters the huge amount of information thrown at it daily.

In *The Grand Paradox of Branding*, exclusively on WARC, Itiel E. Dror, Senior Cognitive Neuroscience Researcher at University College London, and Nir Wegrzyn, CEO of BrandOpus, explore the role of brand in driving purchase decisions from a cognitive-neuroscience perspective.

They note that to impact a consumer's behaviour sufficiently that they buy a product or service, branding activities have to create the right associations between the product existing elements in the brain – the 'right' associations being those that drive decision-making.

Creating these associations requires connection, integration and consolidation with what is in the brain already, in order to fit in with the familiar and known.

However, they add, the brain has a habit of ignoring the familiar. "Hence our paradox: In order for the brain to even process the information it has to be unusual and different, but for it to be associated and integrated with what is in the brain, it has to fit with the known and familiar."

From a cognitive-neuroscience perspective, they argue, "branding, advertising and marketing must first achieve 'cognitive penetrability' (i.e. grab the brain's attention, penetrate into the complex brain processes).

An understanding of how the brain processes marketing messages can help brands move to a new level in terms of how consumers perceive them.

When information enters the human brain, they explain, "it connects to stored representations and is categorised to both higher (superordinate) and lower (subordinate) levels of abstractions. One visual input can result in multiple categorisations."

So someone seeing a white, long-haired German Shepherd might categorise it first as 'dog' and then according to breed, colour, hair type, and as both a pet and an animal.

"But we do not connect the visual stimuli to all of these simultaneously," they add. "There is the first, entry-level abstraction [dog], and then we move to higher or lower categorisation abstractions."

In branding and marketing terms, the aim should therefore be to make the brand rather than the category the entry-level contact.

And that in turn means, say Dror and Wegrzyn, that "the role of branding changes from addressing the consumer in literal terms... the brand needs to primarily exist as a visual construct that transforms the point of entry, controls it and enables memory structures to be formed".

# THE GRAND PARADOX OF BRANDING

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An exploration into the role of brand in driving purchase decisions from a cognitive-neuroscience perspective.

- The volume of information coming into the brain is far more than it can process. Brands must ensure marketing activities are 'acquired', 'remembered' and 'impactful'.
- Marketers should aim for their brands to become 'entry level' connections, enabling faster, more direct and more powerful impact on consumers' brains.
- Successful examples include Starbucks' 'Siren' motif, the McCain 'sunshine' logo, the Piper on Pipers Crisps, and Carling's black label.

## WHY IT MATTERS

A brand must perform multiple cognitive roles. It must first achieve 'cognitive penetrability', grabbing attention among the huge number of stimuli competing for the brain's limited resources. Second, it needs to fit with what is 'known and familiar'. Finally, it must also be integrated with the 'right' associations - those that actually impact behaviour.

## TAKEAWAYS

- The brain is wired to ignore the normal, and to notice the unusual. Brand activity must break the cognitive consistency and expectation. Once that happens, the brain focuses on it.
- Marketers must aim to 'disrupt' loyal consumers of a rival product. Branding must cognitively penetrate their brain, and that requires something unusual and attention grabbing.
- Consumer brains first see the 'entry level', eg a car, and then the specific make (BMW, Mercedes etc). The ultimate cognitive goal of branding is to shift the first entry level contact from the basic level to the specific brand.

## INTRODUCTION

The commonplace and widely used marketing model is based on rationality. It assumes that purchases are subject to an awareness-consideration-decision process, in one way or another. As close as that may be to introspective self-reported behaviour, it neglects what we know about how the brain actually functions. Specifically, the way in which existing associations and the effect of immediate stimuli impacts buying decisions.

Here we discuss, from a cognitive-neuroscience perspective, how the brain actually drives purchasing decisions, and demonstrate that there is a need to focus on different elements in the marketing mix in order for it to become effective. In particular this will demonstrate the vital importance of visual constructs, such as identity, and then:

- the specific way they need to be structured, ie capable of breaking cognition, yet understood;
- the importance of carrying relevant meaning, ie driving associations;
- their memorability, ie specific distinctions.

This provides us with a new way of thinking about priorities, especially at a brand level, when structuring branding activities and messaging. And it is not a simple way. It requires detailed knowledge of both consumer insights and market codes, as well as capabilities in design, graphics and their decoding, all approached through an understanding of human cognition.

## YOUR BRAIN IGNORES MOST OF THE INFORMATION TO WHICH IT IS EXPOSED

We are bombarded with huge amounts of information on a daily basis. Given the brain's limited computational resources, the information coming into the brain is far more than it can process. Therefore, the human brain has developed a variety of cognitive mechanisms to deal with this overwhelming challenge. For example, it uses existing knowledge to guide whether or not to process the incoming information, and if so, how.

Thus, it is highly selective and ignores much of what it sees, only processing a small segment of what it is exposed to. It also collates pieces of information together, so as to create mental representations that reduce cognitive load. All of these make information processing more efficient and have far-reaching implications to branding, advertising and any type of marketing messaging we hope to communicate and instil. From this perspective, we need to make sure our branding and marketing activities are:

1. **ACQUIRED:** Generally, marketing activity, does not mean that it will be acknowledged by the brain. Even if it gets through, it then needs to integrate and consolidate itself with the right associations within the brain. If it does not get into the brain, it is as if it does not exist. Furthermore, if it does get into the brain but not into the right places in the brain, then it will not form the 'right' associations - namely those associations that have behavioural impact.

- 2. REMEMBERED:** Any branding, advertising or marketing message needs to have the proper mental representations, so it is properly encoded in the brain's memory systems. If it does not stick and is not remembered, then the messaging will not form any effect beyond the immediate impact and will create 'marketing waste'.
- 3. IMPACTFUL:** The messaging itself, the narrative, needs to mediate decisions and modify behaviour so it has an actual impact when it counts (e.g. at POP). If it does not change anything, then the branding and marketing has achieved nothing of significance.

## CORRECTLY APPLYING COGNITIVE RESEARCH

We identified that marketing and agencies need to operate in opposition to the prevailing mode of how the industry currently assesses its activities, namely limited, explicit research which is misleading and cognitively naïve.

People can only tell you what they think they think, but not what is going on in their brain processes, which is what actually controls their behaviour.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to present all the alternatives, but we want to explain some of the cognitive processes behind the interactions between brand and consumer. We aim to explain why the behaviour of the consumer in the real world rarely corresponds with the predictions – and what marketers can do differently to address these shortcomings.

## THE GRAND PARADOX OF BRANDING

In order to impact a consumer's behaviour sufficiently that they buy a product or service, branding activities have to create the right associations between the product and the existing elements in the brain - the 'right' associations are those that drive decision making.

Creating these associations requires connection, integration and consolidation with what is in the brain already in order to fit in with the familiar and known. However, the brain has a habit of ignoring the familiar. Hence our paradox: In order for the brain to even process the information it has to be unusual and different, but for it to be associated and integrated with what is in the brain, it has to fit with the known and familiar.

From a cognitive-neuroscience perspective, branding, advertising and marketing must first achieve 'cognitive penetrability' (i.e., grab the brain's attention, penetrate into the complex brain processes). In order for a product or its marketing message to be processed among the huge number of stimuli that are competing for the brain's limited resources, it must first penetrate the brain (hence cognitive penetrability).

But second, and almost instantly, it also needs to fit the known and familiar so as to be associated with existing brain knowledge and structures.

Third, it needs to be connected and to be integrated with the 'right' associations - those that actually impact behaviour.

## COGNITIVE PENETRABILITY

How do we ensure the brand or marketing message is cognitively penetrable? It must grab the attention and shake things up, cause arousal, be disruptive, unfamiliar and unexpected. If not, it will fail to penetrate the consumer's brain and is therefore, de facto, non-existent.

The brain is wired to ignore the normal, and to notice the unusual. The branding activities therefore must break the cognitive consistency and expectation. Once that happens, the brain focuses on it. There are many stimuli in every environment – be it the supermarket aisle or website – all wanting to be noticed. The brain cannot pay attention to most of them, let alone all. As well as seeing all these items the brain is also distracted by other demands, be it short term matters such as the kids demanding attention, telephone texts or bigger issues such as a stressful day at work.

Therefore, if you want your brand to work, cognitive penetrability is an essential first necessary step.

## HOW TO HIJACK LOYALTY...

It is more of a challenge when a consumer already knows what they want to buy. When they are a loyal consumer of a rival product, your branding and marketing must disrupt them. If you stand any chance of altering their behaviour so as to buy your product, they need to first notice it. It needs to cognitively penetrate their brain. And that requires some unusual and remarkable attention grabbing.

## ...AND HOW TO RETAIN A LOYAL CUSTOMER

Now, if your product is the one to which the customer is already loyal then you have a very different, double edged problem than if you were attempting to turn their heads with a rival product. First, you need to continuously defend against new radical entrants as the alternative, competing products continuously try to steal your consumers. To do this you still need to create new cognitively penetrable messages but as you do this you risk alienating existing loyal consumers.

## CATEGORISATIONS AND THE LEVELS OF ABSTRACTION

When information enters the human brain, it connects to stored representations and is categorized to both higher (superordinate) and lower (subordinate) levels of abstractions. One visual input can result in multiple categorisations. For example, if we see a white, long-haired German Shepherd we categorise it first as 'dog' and then according to breed, colour, hair type, and as both a pet and an animal.

But we do not connect the visual stimuli to all of these simultaneously. There is the first, entry level abstraction, and then we move to higher or lower categorization abstractions. The first contact of the visual stimuli with stored information is most often the basic level of abstraction. In the example above, it would be 'dog', and then, from the basic entry level of 'dog', moving to higher (animal) or lower (breed) abstractions. However, with certain experiences, the first entry level can shift and change so it

differs from the basic level. For example, a breeder of German Shepherds, may have 'German Shepherd' as the first entry level, rather than the basic level 'dog'.

## THE BRAND AS THE ENTRY LEVEL CONTACT

In branding and marketing terms, the consumer brain first sees the entry level, a 'car', and then the specific make (BMW, Mercedes, Jaguar, etc.). The ultimate cognitive goal of branding is to shift the first entry level of contact from the basic level to the specific brand, so the consumer's brain first sees 'Mercedes', for example, not 'car'.

The shift here in the entry level - i.e. what the visual information coming into the brain makes first contact with - is crucial. By creating a first entry level with our specific brand rather than the basic level, associations can then be made directly, quickly and more powerfully to those that impact decision making, without going via the basic level.

The change here is substantial and impactful. We are not talking about a semantic label replacement, such as 'hoover' rather than 'vacuum cleaner', or 'Xerox' replacing 'photocopier', but a substantial cognitive brain processing change, in which the brand becomes the entry level connection.

## HOW TO ACHIEVE ENTRY-LEVEL CONNECTION

The structuring of a brand is complex but in the simplest of terms it works like this:

- The product needs to have a narrative at a brand level.
- The brand then needs to own a creative idea that is active in the identity, in a non-literal way.
- That idea needs to be symbolic, and preferably a metaphor to the creative idea.
- When that symbol is visible at the POP, and is associated with the brand, it becomes an entry level brand. i.e. the Siren for Starbucks is an entry level association. In Brandopus experience the McCain sunshine, the Piper and Carling's black label, would be a few successful examples.

The consequence of this idea is that the role of branding changes, from telling the consumer about itself in literal terms, e.g. credible manufacturer of sweets, to a need to condense the brand into a visual representation of itself. To control the entry level, the brand needs to primarily exist as a visual construct that transforms the point of entry, controls it and enables memory structures to be formed.

Understanding associations, and their effect, is not an introspective process - people cannot articulate them because they have no awareness or conscious access to them. Hence why traditional explicit research is an ineffective way of gauging the impact of identity level changes.

## ADVERTISING AND LONG-TERM BRAND BUILDING

Branding is not just a sign off and should not be treated as such. The core metaphor secures the brand idea and frees the message to deliver exciting brand story telling. The crucial factor to this working is that all messaging must contain the brand symbolism and stay within the narrative.

Branding is primary to ad campaigns. The brand narrative must be fixed and owned by the brand itself, allowing the identity to be associated with certain values which can then be activated through ads and, through the visual structure of the identity, become activated at the point of purchase.

The combination of all these scenarios create the perfect storm in which long term brand building can take place for maximum long-term effectiveness. We can only achieve this by cognitively informed branding construction.

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