

Low-involvement processing

Part one: A neuroscientific explanation of how brands work
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IN THIS, the first of two articles on the subject of low-involvement processing, I re-examine the theory, in the light of recent thinking in cognitive neuroscience, and explain what it is and exactly how it operates.

In the second article I shall look at the implications this has for the development and evaluation of brands and brand communication.

Key conclusions

- Consumers do not regard learning about brands as being very important. As a result, most advertising is processed at very low attention levels, using low-involvement processing.
- Low-involvement processing is a cognitive process; it is *not* subconscious or unconscious. It uses very little working memory, which means it is very poor at interpreting messages or drawing conclusions from ads. Instead it simply stores everything as it is recorded, as an association with the brand.
- The way our long-term memory works means that the more often something is processed, the stronger its links to the brand. Thus it is these simple associations, repeatedly stored via low-involvement processing, that tend to define brands in our minds.
- Brand associations can exert a powerful influence on brand decisions, especially if these are made intuitively.

Introduction

My article on this subject in March 1999 (1) drew heavily on the original ideas put forward by Krugman (2) in the 1960s. Krugman underpinned his theory by reference to left and right-brain thinking, and it was something of a shock to me to discover after I had written the article that, in the realm of modern cognitive neuroscience, hemispherical lateralisation is about as up to date as the idea that the first woman was

fashioned from Adam's rib. Clearly the mental basis of the theory needed rethinking, but before embarking on this, I thought it worth considering a more fundamental question.

Low-involvement processing is synonymous with low levels of attention, which raises the question why consumers are not interested enough to pay more attention to advertising? We do not sit in front of our televisions, pen in hand, waiting for the ads to come on so we can write down what they say; nor do we go round supermarkets studying packs and memorising what is written on them. In general we do not seek out brand information at all: we let it come to us. Why? The short answer is that consumers do not regard learning about brands as being very important.

Brand learning is not seen as important

Most of the rational thinking related to brand decisions concerns the 'needs' we have, not which brand we choose. If one particular brand satisfies our needs better than any other, then this is highly likely to be chosen.

But brands are so competitive, and are updated in performance so swiftly, that most are expected, with some justification, to perform in the same way these days. And if you believe that brand 'A' is going to perform like brand 'B', then why do you need burden yourself with trying to learn anything about either of them? Even if you do believe there is a difference, trying to establish which brand really is best is so difficult that the reward rarely justifies the effort. So when we do have to take brand decisions we

often do not even attempt to 'rationalise' them, we resort to using our instincts or intuition.

This in turn has a profound effect on the way we record and store information in our learning in our memories.

How our brains process brand learning

When we talk about learning, most of us assume we are talking about how we were taught at school. There we were told to pay attention, to think about what we are being told, and to ask questions if we did not understand what was being said.

This 'active' learning is called high-involvement processing. The objective behind it is not just to record information but to 'understand' it. In order to do this, high-involvement processing uses intensive use of what is called 'working memory'.

Working memory is what we 'rehearse' with. We use it to manipulate ideas, relate them to other concepts we have learned and understood. So when we use high-involvement processing we use all sorts of different and new ideas about what we see and hear, and then save them into our long-term memory.

High-involvement processing requires high attention, but none of us is able to maintain high levels of attention for long periods. Rather than pay attention all the time, we constantly monitor what is going on around us via another process called pre-attentive processing.

Pre-attentive processing is a subconscious mental process, which contributes to our learning and store of knowledge. Giep Franzen (3) describes it thus:

'Low-involvement processing is a cognitive process; it is not subconscious or unconscious. It uses very little working memory'